

# **An Exploration of the Nature of Transformative Learning and Transformative Pedagogy in a High School English Context**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Associate Professor Bill Maidment, the most wonderful teacher I have known. Being his student shaped me in significant ways that continue to have an impact on my teaching and on who I am as a person. This thesis explores the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. It is fitting that it is dedicated to a profoundly transformative educator.

## **Declaration**

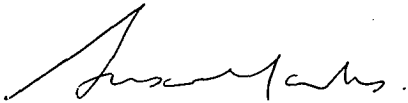
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## **Abstract**

This study explores the nature of learning that transforms established frames of reference for those who engage in it. It also explores the nature of pedagogy that is likely to foster this transformative learning. It is based on the explorations of the teacher-researcher as she reflects on the learning experiences of some of her students and on her own teaching practice.

The teacher-researcher's reflections emanate from her experiences teaching high school English to Years 10 and 11 students within a co-educational school in Sydney. Through engaging in hermeneutic phenomenological research, the teacher-researcher explores the types of learning contexts and pedagogical approaches that may be effective in fostering transformative learning.

The literature review highlights the fact that explorations of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy have occurred almost exclusively within the domain of adult education and many researchers have expressed the view that this is a uniquely adult phenomenon. In exploring the transformative learning experiences of students between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, this study calls into question the view that only adults may experience transformative learning. It also raises awareness about the significance of transformative pedagogy in a high school context.

The study highlights a number of pedagogical practices that are potentially transformative and concludes that transformative learning is most effectively fostered through relational forms of knowing emerging in dialogical learning contexts. Critical reflection is seen as being central to transformative learning and the importance of both affective and cognitive dimensions in the process of critical reflection is emphasised. Within a high school English context, the value of introducing students to a range of texts that may expose them to alternative ways of seeing is highlighted. The study demonstrates that integral to transformative pedagogy is the importance of providing students with both challenging learning experiences and with scaffolds designed to equip them to



meet these challenges. The personally transformative nature of engaging in teacher-research is also highlighted and this is seen to have implications for models of staff professional development within schools.

Reference is made to the limitations of the study, including those associated with being a teacher-researcher. As with other phenomenological studies, the findings do not purport to have direct and specific relevance to other contexts, although they may prove interesting to others interested in fostering transformative learning through transformative pedagogy.

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My indebtedness to my students, whose experiences form the basis of this study, will be clearly evident to anyone who reads this thesis. I am grateful to them for their curiosity, courage, good humour and generosity of spirit.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: The Origins and Purpose of the Study

*"Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.*

*"Begin at the beginning," the King said, gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll*

### 1.1 The Genesis of the Study

In many ways, this study was well under way before I consciously acknowledged to myself that I was engaged in research. I had been teaching high school English for a number of years and, from time to time, and with increasing frequency, I had wondered why some students seemed to be genuinely transformed by their experience of studying English at school. I had been one of these students myself. There was something profoundly transformative about my experience of studying English in my final two years of high school. I knew it had a lot to do with the way in which my English teacher approached teaching and learning, but I never really dwelt much on what he did or how he did it. I just knew that after two years of studying English with him, I felt like new worlds had been opened up to me and that my frames of reference had been irrevocably altered. I knew that my internal landscape had expanded and that I would never be the same again. I viewed myself in a fundamentally different way. I had more confidence in my capacity to engage with the ideas of others and to formulate my own. I read literature in a different way, so that I was conscious of personal resonances and dissonances with literary worlds. I felt more attuned to my own thoughts and feelings and more empathic towards others. Later, in my honours year at university, another teacher (for although he possessed other titles in the world of academia he was, above all else, an exemplary teacher) made a great impact on me. I knew him in his capacity as the supervisor of my English honours thesis, rather than as a teacher of a larger class of students, but here again, this time in a one-on-one teaching and learning situation, I felt transformed. Once more, the nature of this transformative experience eluded me, but in spite of my inability to

articulate it, the personal transformation that I experienced as a result of this learning relationship could not be denied.

These two individuals inspired me to become a teacher of the subject I loved because they made me realise on a deep, subliminal level that teachers have the potential to establish pedagogical contexts that may be transformative for those they teach. It was only after I had been teaching for a number of years and in a range of secondary schools, both in Sydney and overseas, that I more consciously began to ponder *the nature* of learning and pedagogy that may be transformative for students. I wanted to discover whether there were pedagogical approaches that I could adopt that might foster transformative learning in my students. I also wanted to find out whether some of my ingrained beliefs about teaching and learning might, in fact, be inhibiting, rather than promoting transformative learning. I wondered, in spite of my desire to discover what it would be best to do (and not to do) as a teacher, whether the phenomenon of transformative learning had more to do with the inherent qualities of the learner than with the approaches adopted by the teacher. I did not have answers, but I had begun to ask these (and other related) questions and was soon to embark on a journey of exploration that would offer me some insights. I did not realise as I began this journey that as I explored the nature of transformative learning in my students, I myself would be transformed. The experience of embarking upon this research caused me to ask many questions of myself, some of which were startlingly confronting. The quest, whilst it yielded valuable insights, also continued to provoke more and more questions. As such, this study does not seek to provide a recipe for transformative learning. Instead, it offers a series of insights discovered through reflection upon my personal experiences of teaching and learning over the period of this research.

## **1.2 Purpose and Scope of the Research and the Research Question**

As a phenomenon, transformative learning has received considerable attention over the past twenty-five years or so. Robertson (1997) draws a distinction between simple learning and transformative learning:

In transformative learning, as in simple learning, something new is learned. But unlike in simple learning, in transformative learning the learner's integration of that new learning causes the epistemological system that it joins to change its fundamental form or function. That is, the epistemological system regarding the topic is metamorphosed, not merely elaborated (p. 107).

The concept of transformative learning originated with a study conducted by Mezirow (1978) in which he investigated the learning experiences of women returning to school after a long hiatus. Since then, the theory has been widely explored and discussed but it has been argued that "the practice of transformative learning has been minimally investigated and is inadequately defined and poorly understood" (Taylor, 1998, p. 1).

Mezirow's (1991) focus on the centrality of the phenomenon of perspective transformation is crucial to an understanding of transformative learning.

Subsequent studies have endorsed Mezirow's (1991) view when he states:

"Perspective transformation often involves profound changes in self, changes with cognitive, emotional, somatic, and unconscious dimensions" (p. 177). The nature of this perspective transformation has, however, been widely debated.

The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of transformative learning – or learning that profoundly changes the learner's perspective about themselves and/or their world – and of transformative pedagogy. My central research question – **What is the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy in a high school English context?** – encapsulates this purpose. As a teacher-researcher, I explored this question by undertaking a phenomenological study of some of my high school English students and of my own teaching practice. Although I found myself reflecting upon my practice with *all* my students over the course of my research, I nevertheless chose to focus my attention upon two of my classes. The first of these was a co-educational class of Year 10 students that I taught in 2000. At the beginning of the year, there were twenty-three students in this class, but two left the school during the year. (Nevertheless, these two students are discussed in this study). These students were between fifteen and sixteen years old. The second was a co-educational class of Year 11 students that I taught the following year, in 2001. Initially, this class was

comprised of twenty-two students, but one of these moved to another class during the year. (This student is also discussed in the study). These students were between sixteen and seventeen years old. Six of the students who were in my Year 10 class in 2000 were also in my Year 11 class in 2001. The written and verbal comments of these students provided me with rich insights upon which to reflect as I grappled with the myriad dimensions that began to emerge in my exploration of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy.

One of the striking features of the theoretical and empirical literature on transformative learning is that it is confined to the area of adult education. As Taylor (1998), in his review of the literature, states: “Transformative learning offers a theory of learning that is uniquely adult...” (p. 5). This study quite clearly challenges the assumption that transformative learning is uniquely adult, as my research is based on my teaching and learning experiences with adolescent high school English students. In the Literature Review in Chapter 2, I further explore the claim that transformative learning is a uniquely adult phenomenon.

Whilst my study revolves around the over-arching phenomenological question, What is the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy in a high school English context?, other questions emerge in relation to this vast central research question but are effectively sub-components of it, rather than discrete questions in their own right. These include:

- What are the hallmarks of transformative learning?
- What is the role of relationships – between students and between students and a teacher – in fostering transformative learning?
- What enabling conditions, contexts and pedagogical approaches may trigger and foster transformation? How might I seek to foster transformative learning in my students through transformative pedagogy?

Both transformative learning and transformative pedagogy are addressed in the central research question and in these related questions because, as a teacher, it seems to me that the nature of learning and the nature of pedagogy need to be considered together. To consider pedagogy, without considering the experience of

individual learners, is to assume that a teacher's decisions about teaching and learning matter at the expense of a consideration of learners' individual responses and interactions. To consider the experience of individual learners, without considering how pedagogical choices may provide enabling or inhibiting conditions for learners, is to deny the contribution that educators may make in fostering the transformative learning of their students.

### **1.3 Brief Overview of the Study**

This study begins in Chapter 2 by reviewing the literature that has explored transformative learning theory and practice in the past. Other authors that have impacted on my thinking as I have undertaken my research are also acknowledged. In addition, although I have briefly outlined the purpose and structure of the study in this chapter, in Chapter 2, I more fully explain the intention and organisation of the study against the backdrop of the literature review. In Chapter 3, I explain the emergence of my research methodology. This chapter includes a discussion of some of the issues surrounding the fact that throughout my research I was both teacher and researcher simultaneously. The research methodology is identified as being phenomenological and, more specifically, is aligned with Max van Manen's (1979; 1982a; 1982b; 1985; 1997) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research. The research methods that I used in my research are also explicated. Chapters 4 to 8 each explore a particular facet or dimension of the phenomenon of transformative learning: dialogic learning; relational learning through peer mentoring; critical reflection through reflective journal writing; the study of literature as a means of fostering transformative learning; and self-directed learning. Together these chapters reveal something of the nature of transformative learning, and of the pedagogy that may foster it, from my perspective and within the pedagogical contexts that I experienced over the course of my research. Each chapter can be viewed as a thread that, when woven together with the other threads, forms the tapestry that represents my understanding of the nature of transformative learning. A discussion of my attempts to foster transformative learning, in a variety of ways, through transformative pedagogy, is woven into my exploration of the nature of transformative learning in these chapters. Another way of viewing these

chapters is to see them as themes that illuminate something of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. Van Manen (1997) describes such themes as being

like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes (p. 90).

In Chapter 9, I summarise some of the insights that I have gained about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy and provide suggestions for further research.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its dual nature: it is simultaneously both theoretical and highly practical in nature. In seeking to unearth something of the nature of transformative learning, it adds to the discussion of transformative learning to be found in the body of existing literature (explored in Chapter 2). In asking a phenomenological question about the *nature* of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, the study offers broad insights into some of the seminal dimensions of learning and pedagogy that may be termed transformative. This study may be of particular interest to others exploring transformative learning and transformative pedagogy because of its unusual focus upon adolescents, not adults. To my knowledge, until now extensive studies of transformative learning have taken place almost exclusively within the domain of adult education or have focused on individual adult learning experiences. This study departs from these previously established parameters through seeking to explore transformative learning by focusing on the learning experiences of senior high school English students. Although I hope to contribute to the general understanding of the nature of transformative learning, the driving motivation for engaging in this study was practical and personal: I wanted my discoveries to shape my teaching practice. Through illuminating facets of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, I have indeed refined my own teaching practice and have found myself more sensitively attuned to my students'



experiences of learning. In his review of literature on transformative learning, Taylor (1998) highlights that “most authors of these studies, as well as Mezirow himself, underemphasize the practical implications associated with facilitating and encouraging learners to revise their meaning perspectives” (p. 2). This study has been of practical benefit to me, and although a phenomenological study does not seek to offer a blueprint for others, I do hope that some of the insights that I have gleaned may prove useful to other practitioners as they reflect upon their unique pedagogical contexts.

I began my research with the belief that transformative learning could, in fact, occur within adolescents and this belief no doubt originated from my personal experience as an adolescent. It was also informed by my observations of students I had taught who I believed showed evidence of profound change in their perspectives (especially in relation to their perceptions of themselves as learners and, more broadly, as human beings). These were not vague intuitions on my part; some of my students had themselves articulated these paradigm shifts and they were evident to me in their revised approaches to learning. What I was not sure about was *how* and *why* these students had experienced learning of a type that was transformative. I wanted to know the answer to these questions so that I might more effectively foster such transformation in my students in the future, if indeed my students’ experiences were related to the pedagogical approaches that underpinned their learning experiences in the classroom. It has been argued that the assumption that students need to be transformed is in itself arrogant, patronising and controlling. Magro (2002-03), for example, in her study of the conceptualisations adult literacy educators have about the teaching-learning process within the framework of transformative learning theory, found that a number of the teachers who took part in the study “associated roles such as ‘reformer,’ ‘provocateur’ and ‘transformative educator’ with manipulation, and an imposition of the educators’ values onto the student” (p. 28). In my personal experience, and in what I observed of the experiences of my students who I believed had experienced transformative learning, this assumption did not ring true. The transformative learning that I experienced and witnessed, far from being controlling and patronising was, for most students, liberating and empowering. And so I set about seeking to determine the factors that contributed to significant

transformation, when it occurred, in my students (and in me). I soon realised that the ability to capture such factors – as if they were tangible objects that could be measured and weighed – eluded me. The process of transformation is, by its nature, elusive. It is also, for those who experience it, frequently ineffable.

Exploring the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy proved to be more like exploring the nature of a person than anything else. Like an individual one comes to know well, the nature of learning that is transformative, and of the pedagogy that seeks to foster it, began to strike me as being multi-faceted. Some of these facets were inextricably connected but just as an interesting person may be characterised by an enigmatic fusion of disparate, even contradictory qualities, the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy also proved difficult to easily characterise. It is my hope that, in the ensuing pages, something of my struggle to articulate the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy will be felt by the reader, for it was when I struggled most (and found myself qualifying my thoughts, expressing ambiguities and questioning the mystery of transformation), that I felt my exploration came closest to an authentic representation of my lived experience.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Transformative Learning Theory and Pedagogical Practice: A Review of Literature**

*Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before him.*

Mark Twain

### **2.1 The Research Question and the Literature Review**

This thesis explores the nature of transformative learning, and of the pedagogy that fosters it, through a phenomenological study of some of my senior high school English students over a two year period. In this chapter, I review a range of literature that has a direct bearing on the substance of this thesis. This includes literature written explicitly about transformative learning theory, as well as literature on other subjects that have a bearing on transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, such as the role of emotions in the learning process and the importance of empathic learning contexts.

The review begins with a discussion of definitional issues associated with transformative learning and provides an overview of transformative learning theory. I then explore some of the contentious issues emerging from transformative learning theory. The first of these surrounds whether transformative learning should be viewed as a uniquely adult phenomenon. I then examine some of the different models of transformative learning. Following this is a discussion of the debate over the extent to which transformative learning is a rational process. This leads in to a discussion of the role of emotions in the learning process. I also foreground the importance of the literature on empathy when considering learning contexts that may foster transformative learning. The debate surrounding whether transformative learning is an autonomous or relational process has particular relevance to this study and so I highlight some of the key perspectives on this issue and signal my position within the debate. Following this, I explore the literature emphasising transformative learning as a

precursor to social change and examine the issues of power associated with transformative learning. Finally, I examine some of the literature on ways of fostering transformative learning, as this has particular relevance to my exploration of the nature of transformative pedagogy.

## **2.2 Transformative Learning: Definitional Issues**

### **2.2.1 Introduction**

The concept of transformative learning originated with a study conducted by Mezirow (1978) about the learning experiences of women returning to school after a long hiatus. Since that time, numerous studies have been undertaken and articles and books written on the subject. Edward Taylor (1997, 1998, 2000) drew together many of these studies in his critical reviews of both the theory and practice of transformative learning, highlighting the wide ranging experiences and perspectives that are explored in this significant body of literature. Since Edward Taylor's review of the literature in 2000, studies have continued to reveal the significance of this field.

In broad terms, transformative learning has been defined as "the process of making meaning of one's experience" (Taylor, 1998, p. 1). In drawing a distinction between transformational (or transformative) learning and other types of learning, Clark (1993) argues

that transformational learning produces more far-reaching changes in the learners than does learning in general, and that these changes have a significant impact on the learner's subsequent experiences. In short, transformational learning *shapes* people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize (p. 47).

Magro (2002-03) defines transformative learning as

a process whereby individuals reflectively transform existing beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that may limit their ability to achieve their personal and intellectual potential. A fundamental shift takes place in the way individuals see themselves, others, and the world (p. 21).

This transformation of existing beliefs forms the basis of Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation. Mezirow (1996) posits that "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 162). Elaborating on this definition, Mezirow (2000) explains:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (p. 8).

### **2.2.2 Meaning Schemes, Frames of Reference and Perspective Transformation**

In Mezirow's paradigm, *meaning schemes* and *frames of reference* are important. Meaning schemes are comprised of "specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, or feelings involved in making an interpretation" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5). They change regularly and frequently and often operate outside of our awareness. A frame of reference, or meaning perspective, is defined by Mezirow (2000) as "the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions" (p. 16). Put another way, meaning perspectives may be viewed as "rule systems governing perception and cognition" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5). Kegan (2000) defines a frame of reference as "a way of knowing" (p. 52). Cranton (2000) explains:

Our frames of reference are complex webs of assumptions, expectations, values, and beliefs that act as a filter or screen through which we view ourselves and the world. Our cultural background, the knowledge we have acquired, our moral and spiritual beliefs, and our own psychological makeup all influence how we interpret and make meaning out of our experience (pp. 181-182).

A frame of reference is comprised of both "a habit of mind and resulting points of view. A *habit of mind* is a set of assumptions – broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience"

(Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). In turn, “a habit of mind becomes expressed as a point of view” which is comprised of clusters of meaning schemes (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). Without consciously questioning them, we tend to rely on our meaning schemes to guide our action. Learning often involves adding “compatible ideas to elaborate our fixed frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). Transformative learning, however, involves replacing an existing frame of reference with a more dependable one. Mezirow (1991) defines perspective transformation as

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (p. 167).

Taylor (1998) explains that

our meaning perspectives act as a sieve through which each new experience is interpreted and given meaning. As the new experience is assimilated into these structures, it either reinforces the perspective or gradually stretches its boundaries, depending on the degree of congruency. However, when a radically different and incongruent experience cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective, it is either rejected or the meaning perspective is transformed to accommodate the new experience. A transformed meaning perspective is the development of a new meaning structure....It is this change in our meaning perspectives that is at the heart of Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation – a world view shift (p. 7).

### **2.2.3 Domains of Learning**

Mezirow (1991), drawing on Habermas (1984), sees a change in meaning evolving in two domains of learning, instrumental learning and communicative learning, and acknowledges that “most learning involves both instrumental and communicative aspects” (p. 80). Instrumental learning focuses on learning through task-oriented problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships. Communicative learning is centred around “increasing insight and attaining common ground through symbolic interaction” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 80), or understanding the meaning of what others “communicate concerning values,

ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 8). When these domains of learning involve “reflective assessment of premises” and “movement through cognitive structures by identifying and judging presuppositions”, then transformative learning occurs (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5). In addition to these two domains of learning, Habermas (1972) adds emancipatory knowledge that involves increased self-awareness and freedom from constraints. In recent times, however, Mezirow and others have recognised that there is not a separate emancipatory domain of learning but that emancipatory learning is “a *process* that pertains in different ways to both instrumental and communicative learning domains” (Wiessner and Mezirow, 2000, p. 345).

#### **2.2.4 The Centrality of Experience, Critical Reflection and Reflective Discourse**

Taylor (1998) identifies the three common themes of Mezirow’s theory as the centrality of experience, critical reflection and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation (p. 8).

According to Mezirow (1991, 1995) transformative learning flows from a learner’s experiences and it is these that form the basis of what is to be transformed. Mezirow (1991) states, “Learning always involves making a new experience explicit and schematizing, appropriating, and acting upon it” (p. 11). He goes on to draw a distinction between normal learning and transformative learning:

Normally, when we learn something, we attribute an old meaning to a new experience....In transformative learning, however, we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to the old experience (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11).

Hart (1990b), in discussing the liberation of oppressed individuals through consciousness raising, also stresses “the importance of using personal experience as the original source to be critically reflected upon” (p. 60). In my study, too, it is clear that students’ experiences are central to the process of transformative

learning. Furthermore, this study explores the role of the teacher in providing students with learning experiences that might catalyse critical reflection and that may, in turn, lead to transformative learning. Providing students with these experiences is seen to be a vital part of transformative pedagogy.

In order to revise our frames of reference, we need to engage in critical reflection. This involves critiquing our assumptions and beliefs that have been formed as a result of previous experience. In order to transform a frame of reference, Mezirow (1998) highlights the crucial role of critical reflection of assumptions and critical self-reflection of assumptions. Critical reflection of assumptions focuses more on instrumental learning and the ways in which others' assumptions may be limited, whereas critical self-reflection of assumptions, or a subjective reframing, focuses on the ways in which one's own world view has been limited. Edward Taylor (2000) points out that an "overarching characteristic" of transformation emerging from the studies that have been conducted is that it "deals with subjective reframing (critical reflection on one's assumptions) as opposed to objective reframing (critical reflection of others' assumptions)" (p. 298).

Mezirow (1991) suggests that critical reflection and self-reflection of assumptions often occurs through engaging in reflective discourse with others. He defines discourse, in the context of transformation theory, as

that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives. Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 10-11).

In Mezirow's (1991) schema, a distinguishing characteristic of this discourse is that it is rational. This is what distinguishes it from everyday dialogue: "In rational discourse, in contrast to everyday dialogue, principles and operations are made linguistically explicit" (p. 77).



### 2.2.5 The Focus of the Study

Since Mezirow's formulation of his theory of transformation, a range of studies in the field has emerged. In his most recent review, Edward Taylor (2000) draws together many of these, showing how empirical studies confirm, extend and deviate from dimensions of Mezirow's transformational learning theory. It has been acknowledged that these studies have "added to our understanding of different aspects of transformational learning theory" (Wilson and Kiely, 2002, p. 3), but unresolved issues and tensions have remained. Indeed, Edward Taylor (2000) argues that

there has been a redundancy of research, an insufficiency of in-depth exploration into the nature of particular components of a perspective transformation, and a reification of transformative learning as we presently know it, whereby its basic premises about learning have become accepted practice in adult education (p. 286).

This study explores factors that have contributed to transformative learning in some of my high school English students. Predominantly, my students' meaning schemes and frames of reference were transformed in relation to how they perceived themselves and their capabilities as learners. Very often, distorted assumptions about their ability (or lack of it) in a range of learning contexts were revised and these revised frames of reference formed the basis of their future learning experiences. In the language of constructive-developmental theory, some of my students experienced "a shift from a socialized to a self-authoring epistemology" (Kegan, 2000, p. 59). Frequently, it was not merely a case of students adding more confidence to an existing level of confidence, but of them re-defining their view of themselves as learners. For example, in Chapter 8, I explore the process by which several of them moved from believing that as learners they needed to be "spoon-fed" by me as their teacher to recognising that they were capable of self-directed learning. This was a seismic shift that one student expressed in terms of moving from a conception of herself as a baby, to a conception of herself as a mature learner capable of self-direction. Throughout the study, students' transformed meaning schemes about their fellow learners and about the world are also evident.

## 2.3 Transformative Learning: Adults Only?

From its inception, this research was based on the premise that transformative learning could occur in adolescents. This was the case in spite of the fact that the literature in the field focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of adults and that transformative learning has been described as “uniquely adult” (Taylor, 1998, p. 5). As Mezirow (1991) posits, “The formative learning of childhood becomes transformative learning in adulthood” (p. 3). Implicit in this comment of Mezirow’s is the assumption that transformative learning is only possible at a particular stage of development, prior to which learning may only be formative, not transformative. According to this view, only in adulthood do people acquire established frames of reference that may then be transformed. Mezirow (1997), for example, posits that “adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – assumptions, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their world” (p. 5). The implicit assumption here is that children and adolescents have not.

It is the capacity for critical self-reflection that many adult educational theorists see as being uniquely adult. Mezirow (2000), for example, states: “Although adolescents may learn to become critically reflective of the assumptions of others, becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions appears to be much more likely to occur in adults” (p. 26). Kegan (1982, 1994) reinforces this view. This raises the question of the exact point at which formative learning ends and at which transformative learning may begin. It also raises the issue of whether transformative learning may be fostered at all amongst young people. To argue that being an adult necessarily means that a person is capable of transformative learning, or that being an adolescent makes a person incapable of transformative learning, seems to me somewhat arbitrary. In this context, Belenky and Stanton (2000) hold an interesting position on the capacities of adults:

Most adults simply have not developed their capacities for articulating and criticizing the underlying assumptions of their own thinking, nor do they analyze the thinking of others in these

ways. Furthermore, many have never had experience with the kinds of reflective discourse that Mezirow prescribes (p. 73).

Whatever the validity of such a claim, surely what is important is for educators to provide both adolescents and adults with opportunities to develop their capacities to reflect on their assumptions and to provide them with support as they engage in this process. As a result of my research, I am convinced that transformative learning may take place in adolescents, but even if it could not, transformative pedagogy would serve a purpose. Through training adolescents to develop their capacities for critical reflection, reflective discourse, coping with disorienting dilemmas, and other key dimensions of the transformative learning process, they are, at the very least, better placed to experience transformative learning as adults.

Grabove (1997) points out that “Mezirow emphasizes that simply acquiring knowledge or developing a skill does not necessarily engender autonomy of thought and understanding” (p. 91). She goes on to state:

The key to this second dimension is the educator’s facility with fostering critical reflection. As part of the process of learning content or attaining new skills, adult learners should also develop an awareness of assumptions – both their own and those of others, which they have hitherto taken for granted – and become critical of those assumptions (p. 91).

Based on my research, it is my belief that this critical reflection of assumptions and indeed critical self-reflection of assumptions, the bedrock of Mezirow’s transformative learning model, should also be an integral dimension of the learning process for high school students. This does not mean that all adolescent high school students will be capable of such critical reflection and self-reflection (just as not all adults are capable of these processes), although this study highlights that some most certainly are. What it does mean is that one of the roles of the high school educator should be to foster critical reflection of assumptions and critical self-reflection of assumptions in his or her students. Wiessner and Mezirow (2000) argue: “The *goal* of adult education is to help the learner develop the requisite learning processes to think and choose with more reliable insight, to become a more autonomous thinker” (p. 348). I suggest this is also the goal of

high school education and, therefore, a consideration of the most effective ways to foster transformative learning is equally important in this context.

Edward Taylor (2000) summarises the views of others who assume that transformative learning theory is uniquely adult:

Meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood through socialization and acculturation, most frequently during significant experiences with teachers, parents, and mentors. Only in adulthood are meaning structures clearly formed and developed and the revision of established meaning perspectives takes place (p. 288).

He does, however, go on to question this assumption: “However, there has been little research to support this claim, such that transformative learning has not been explored in relationship to learning and the age of the participants.” (Edward Taylor, 2000, pp. 288-289). According to Edward Taylor’s (1998, 2000) thorough canvassing of the field, the study that involved the youngest participants was Whalley’s (1995) study of “forms of reflection and the role they play in the transformation of meaning structures when learning a new culture” (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 289). This study focused on seventeen year old Canadian high school students and nineteen year old Japanese high school students. Edward Taylor (2000) goes on to question the practice of asserting any arbitrary age or stage when transformative learning may begin, suggesting that “transformative learning might inform meaning-making during childhood or adolescence” (p. 289). My study of adolescent high school English students aged between fifteen and seventeen may well involve the youngest cohort of students to form the basis of a study in transformative learning to date and it suggests that some adolescents are indeed capable of transformative learning.

It is clear that the context for my research implicitly challenges the assumption that only adults can experience transformative learning. And yet the focus of the study is not on *whether* high school students are capable of perspective transformation, but is an exploration of the *nature* of transformative learning and of the pedagogy that fosters it. What enabling conditions, contexts and pedagogical approaches may catalyse transformation? What types of inter-

personal relationships – between students and between students and a teacher – may foster transformative learning? How might students demonstrate that transformative learning has taken place? In short, what do learning and pedagogy that are transformative look like?

## 2.4 Models of Transformative Learning

The defining aspects of the process of transformative learning have come under question since Mezirow's development of a ten step model. Mezirow (1991) argues that a perspective transformation involves an individual's movement through a series of steps and phases toward a more progressive developmental meaning perspective.

Tennant (1993) criticises Mezirow's view, arguing that he needs to draw a distinction between learning experiences which are fundamentally transformative, and experiences that involve changes that are to be expected in different phases of life (p. 39). Tennant (1993) develops his argument by stating that perspective transformation

represents a developmental shift (a new world view) rather than simply developmental progress. Adult education researchers and practitioners need to recognise this distinction in order to avoid the inappropriate application of perspective transformation to instances of normative development (p. 41).

In response to this view, Mezirow (1994) argues that Tennant is creating a false dichotomy between developmental shift and developmental progress. Mezirow's (2000) view is clear: "Transformations in habit of mind may be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind" (p. 21). Robertson (1997) argues that

transformative learning and personal development seem identical. That is, the times when an individual has learned something that has transformed him or her are those occasions when the individual feels he or she has grown or developed as a person; and, vice versa, occasions of growth or development are always

marked by the individual's having learned something that has transformed him or her (p. 107).

The issue here of what constitutes transformation is an important one, not least because it would seem desirable for educators and learners to be able to identify if and when transformation has occurred.

Mezirow's ten step model (1991), formed as a result of his study in the 1970s of women returning to school after a long hiatus, is a linear process. As Edward Taylor (2000) indicates, Mezirow's model of a perspective transformation has been confirmed, in general terms, by some studies (Dewane, 1993; Egan, 1985; Hunter, 1980; Lytle, 1989; Morgan, 1987; Williams, 1985). However, few of these provide substantial data to confirm each step. Interestingly, Edward Taylor (2000) goes on to state:

Later studies find the process of perspective transformation to be more recursive, evolving and spiraling in nature (Coffman, 1989; Elias, 1993; Holt, 1994; Laswell, 1994; Neuman, 1996; Saavedra, 1995; Taylor, 1994) (p. 290).

Mezirow (1995) later agrees that the process does not always follow the sequence of steps. Saavedra's (1995) investigation of a teachers' study group led to a formulation not of a step by step model, but of thirteen transformative conditions, such as ownership and reflective practice, for the transformative learning process (Taylor, 1998, p. 40). This notion of transformative conditions is of practical use to educators and learners. It is also founded on the realisation that the process of transformation will vary from one individual to the next. In a similar vein, in this study I foreground some of the enabling conditions that helped to foster transformation in some of my students. In Chapter 8, I also present what I have termed The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning, based on my involvement with my students who engaged in extensive self-directed learning tasks. Here I identify the emotional and behavioural patterns that emerged as my students engaged in these tasks. Several students moved from feeling anxious and inadequate at the beginning of the task, to feeling confident and self-assured upon its completion. This movement involved a replacement of a frame of reference in which they doubted their capacity for self-directed learning, to a frame of

reference that recognised their capacity for this type of learning. Mezirow (2000) states, “The most personally significant and emotionally exacting transformations involve a critique of previously unexamined premises regarding one’s self” (pp. 21-22). This is the type of transformation that was experienced by my students as they began to see themselves as learners in a completely new light. Becoming aware of the emotional and behavioural patterns experienced by my students has proved useful for me, but different patterns may well emerge in other contexts. What I offer is based on my own phenomenological study, and whilst I hope it may be of interest to other educators, it by no means purports to be a definitive model. As Mezirow (1991) points out, research in transformative learning

confines itself largely to limited rather than universal claims. Judgments made by the researcher depend upon examples from the experiences of the researcher and others rather than upon representative samples of universally agreed-upon categories as in positivist research. Examples are analyzed, but no analysis is final or complete; new data, new contexts, and new perspectives make every judgment or belief provisional (p. 222).

## **2.5 The Fusion of Rationality, Emotion and Other Ways of Knowing**

Grabove (1997) observes that transformative learning has two dimensions that, at times, may seem to conflict: the cognitive, rational, and objective on the one hand, and the intuitive, imaginative, and subjective on the other:

The transformative learner moves in and out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, of the personal and the social. In seeming paradox, the value of the imagination and the power of emotion exist within the rational notion of transformation, and learners rely on analysis to make sense of their feelings, images and intuitive descriptions (p. 95).

In the literature on transformative learning, a division based on these two dimensions is evident. Yet as Imel (1998) points out: “Both the rational and the affective play a role in transformative learning” (p. 4). Indeed I would argue that it is the fusion of the two, not the privileging of one over another, that is most likely to foster transformative learning. This is, in part, because recent neurological

research highlights the integrated relationship between cognitive and affective processes (LeDoux, 1989, 1996; Parrott and Schulkin, 1993; De Sousa, 1991; Damasio, 1994, 2000, 2003), such that the neat compartmentalisation of each is now widely recognised as fallacious.

Most of the research acknowledges the central role of critical reflection within the process of transformative learning. The issue of contention, however, centres on whether critical reflection is merely a rational process. Mezirow (1991) certainly describes the process of critical self-reflection leading potentially to transformation as conscious and rational. Rational discourse becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action, where experience is reflected upon and assumptions and beliefs are questioned, and where meaning schemes and meaning structures are ultimately transformed. According to Mezirow (1995), it is through the rational examination of our meaning perspectives (or through premise reflection) that perspective transformation may occur.

By contrast, other studies have led researchers to conclude that transformative learning is heavily reliant on the affective dimension of knowing, or the role that emotions and feelings play in making meaning. Edward Taylor (2000) points out that some researchers (Morgan, 1987; Coffman, 1989; Sveinunggaard, 1993) have argued that the validation and processing of emotions is a necessary precursor to critical reflection (p. 303). Gehrels (1984), in his study of how school principals formed meaning from their experiences, found “feelings to be the trigger for reflection” (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 303). Neuman (1996), in a study of participants in the National Extension Leadership Development Program, found that in learning that included affective and experiential dimensions, “participants developed significant capacity both to achieve a higher level of self-understanding and greater self-direction” (p. 435) (Taylor, 1998, pp. 34-35). Whilst Mezirow’s emphasis is on critical reflection as a rational process, it is not fair to argue that he ignores the role of emotion in the transformative learning process. He, too, presents the view that it “is not enough to understand intellectually the need to change the way one acts; one requires emotional strength and an act of will in order to move forward” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 171). Mezirow (2000) also acknowledges that transformative learning “is often an intensely threatening



emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change” (pp. 6-7).

Through my own research, I have come to discover the power of emotions in the transformative learning process. Becoming more aware of how to respond to these emotional dimensions has been an important focus of my development as a teacher. Edward Taylor (2000) suggests that it would be helpful for research “to identify specific strategies similar to what has already been developed for fostering and encouraging critical reflection (Brookfield, 1996) that would help educators maximize the use of feelings in the reflective process” (p. 305). In Chapter 5, I consider the importance of peer mentoring relationships in supporting emotional responses to the process of transformative learning. In Chapter 8, I explore in some detail my students’ emotional experiences as they engaged in a challenging self-directed learning task. The need for students to develop what Goleman (1996, 1998) calls emotional intelligence as they engage in learning that is potentially transformative is clear. As Goleman (1996) states, “The predominant models among cognitive scientists of how the mind processes information have lacked an acknowledgment that rationality is guided by – and can be swamped by – feeling” (p. 41). Recent research in the fields of neuroscience and psychology has shown that feelings are “the rudder for reason, without which it wanders aimlessly with little or no bearing in the process of making decisions” (Taylor, 2001, p. 234). Damasio’s (1994, 2000, 2003) insights have also helped shape my thinking about transformative learning, in that they have made me realise the importance of acknowledging and responding to students’ affective states. Damasio and his colleagues have recently conducted experiments designed to test the notion that feelings are related to neural mappings of body state and these have yielded positive results (Damasio, 2003, p. 96). It is no longer pedagogically sound to ignore the power of affective dimensions in the learning process, and this is especially true for those interested in fostering transformative learning.

Some researchers interested in transformative learning have focused on other ways of knowing. Boyd and Myers (1988; Boyd, 1991), for example, define

personal transformation within a framework of analytic psychology, based on Jung's work, and suggest that transformation is not entirely, or even primarily, rational or conscious. They describe the process of discernment in which symbols, images, and archetypes play a role in personal illumination and argue that transformation involves coming to terms with subconscious aspects of one's personality and resolving conflicts within one's psyche. But as Grabove (1997) suggests, the perspectives of Boyd and Myers (1988) and Mezirow (1991) share a number of common elements, including "humanism, emancipation, autonomy, critical reflection, equity, self-knowledge, participation and discourse" (p. 90). It is important to recognise, too, that the experience of transformative learning is different for different people and so certain conceptualisations of transformative learning theory are perhaps more helpful to some individuals than others. Cranton (2000), drawing on Jung's ([1921] 1971) theory of psychological type, highlights this fact when she states that "individuals who undergo transformative learning do so in different ways. Their psychological habits of mind influence the way they reconstruct frames of reference" (p. 192). Furthermore, recent research on memory has highlighted that a lot of what we learn takes place outside our working memory and yet what we learn unconsciously still has a significant impact on our behaviour (Kihlstrom, 1987; Greenwald & Banji, 1995).

## **2.6 The Importance of Empathic Learning Contexts**

If the fusion of cognitive and affective dimensions in the process of transformative learning is recognised, then "empathic learning contexts" (Arnold, 2005, p. 162), ideally suited to the promotion of transformative learning, may emerge. Much has been written about empathy in general, but less has been written about its role in the teaching and learning process. Empathy is a term that has been defined in a myriad of ways, some definitions emphasising its cognitive dimensions and others its affective dimensions. Verducci (2000) argues: "Most conceptions of empathy possess a primary affinity with either emotion or cognition; in them, empathy becomes primarily a mode of feeling or a mode of knowing or reasoning" (p. 66). Eisenberg and Strayer (1987), in drawing together a range of perspectives on empathy, define it themselves in the following way:

In our view, empathy involves sharing the perceived emotion of another – “feeling with” another. This vicarious affective reaction may occur as a response to overt perceptible cues indicative of another’s affective state (e.g., a person’s facial expressions), or as the consequence of inferring another’s state on the basis of indirect cues (e.g., the nature of the other’s situation). Thus, we define empathy as an emotional response that stems from another’s emotional state or condition and that is congruent with the other’s emotional state or situation (p. 5).

In a similar vein, Noddings (1984) states:

Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other (p.16).

Arnold (2005) highlights both the affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy when she states:

In common parlance, ‘empathy’ means being able to imagine, often intuitively and instinctively, how the other feels. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1959) described empathy as ‘vicarious introspection’. As a more complex process than ‘identification’, this definition includes both affective attunement and the cognitive capacity to judge how best to respond empathically to another’s emotional and cognitive state (p. 32).

As a teacher, I have become aware of the close connection between the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy, to the point where it is evident that feeling, judgement and action are often difficult to separate. Vetlesen’s (1994) schema of moral performance, referred to in Verducci’s (2000) conceptual history of empathy, is helpful in this context. According to Vetlesen (1994), engaging empathically with an individual is what triggers perception. From this perspective, empathy is a faculty that detects facial expressions and other contextual clues and gives rise to moral perception. This, in turn, gives rise to moral action (Verducci, 2000, p. 74). Put another way, as I perceive the phenomenon of my students engaging in the learning process, I do so through the eyes of empathy. Empathy is both what motivates me to *see* the phenomenon in the first place and it also speaks

of the *manner* in which I see. Having perceived the phenomenon before me, I then reflect and make judgments.

Extreme views of empathy that privilege either affective or cognitive dimensions at the expense of the other do not seem to me to be helpful in an educational context. One type of empathy that privileges the affective dimension, Verducci (2000) labels “aesthetic empathy”(p. 67), whereby one’s own concrete sense of self is consumed by the pure aestheticism of their experiences. The problem with this notion of empathy for me as a teacher is that extinguishing myself in an attempt to imaginatively project myself into the worlds of my students would not enable me to exercise the sort of caring guidance conducive to productive and potentially transformative learning.

The other end of the spectrum, at which cognition is privileged over affective dimensions of empathy, is also problematic from a pedagogical perspective. According to Verducci (2000), most versions of Freudian therapeutic empathy “incorrectly assume that one can maintain utter control and detachment while feeling with others” (p. 72). Verducci (2000) explains:

This therapeutic empathic process occurs in the following manner: when a therapist sees a child crying in a sandbox, she may feel a fleeting sadness with the child, but her job requires that she detach from this feeling and use the knowledge of the child’s sadness to make the child feel better (p. 72).

The emphasis on detachment here seems too removed from real attunement to students’ thoughts and feelings, in that empathy is described as a procedure to be followed, rather than a dimension of a caring, pedagogical relationship. I would question here Verducci’s linking of control and detachment. A detached teacher is someone who has removed themselves from the feelings of their students, so that they are unmoved by these feelings. A teacher who is engaged with their students, both cognitively and affectively, will, by definition, not be detached from them, but at the same time, they may well be fully in control. It is certainly possible for me to be attuned to what my students are feeling, in an engaged sense, but at the same time to respond to their feelings in a way which reflects I am in control (not of them, but of myself in relationship with them).

A dimension of empathy that I have found it more helpful to reflect upon is the notion that it is an interpersonal phenomenon that is often promoted through dialogue with others. Belenky and Stanton (2000) highlight the concern of feminist writers to reclaim the types of discourse that have been silenced because they are not shaped by a clearly delineated polarisation of viewpoints. Gilligan (1993) interviewed women about a serious moral dilemma they were actually confronting and discovered what she terms “the ethic of care” or “the response mode” to moral conflicts. Belenky and Stanton (2000) explain Gilligan’s “response mode”:

In this mode, questioning, listening, and responding to everyone’s concerns is seen as the way to bring about lasting and satisfying solutions to moral predicaments.... One works especially hard to understand and present the perspective of those who are incapable of articulating their own thoughts well (p. 79).

I would argue that this response mode needs to be adopted by educators interested in fostering transformative learning in the classroom. If it is not, students may feel coerced into thinking in certain ways because their own voices are not valued. Valuing each student’s voice and encouraging students to value their own perspectives is a necessary precursor to students then questioning whether their frames of reference may need revision in the light of the perspectives they have heard from others. I would also go a step further and argue that it is the role of the educator interested in transformative learning to encourage students to work on developing their capacity to truly listen to one another by actively seeking to articulate the viewpoints of those around them.

Interestingly, Stein (1964), who worked with Husserl, the great developer of philosophical phenomenology, argued that empathy provides individuals with a knowledge of themselves as well as others. In the context of transformative learning, a growing awareness of the changing self is central. This is developed, in part, through an empathic approach to teaching, learning and research. Arnold (2005) highlights the benefits for students flowing from the presence of an empathic educator:

Empathic education creates a milieu within which the educator's non-judgmental, accepting and validating stance allows affects, emotional states and cognitive understandings to be expressed, explored and modulated....Empathic learning contexts can promote shifts in affective and cognitive states that enlarge our awareness of life's possibilities. Such contexts subtly encourage participants to be centred in their learning, but not self-centred in the pejorative sense. These contexts recognise the developmental potential for learning which is meaningful, personalised, and experienced through relationships with others and the culture we inhabit (p. 162).

Empathy is difficult to define and it is even more difficult to measure its impact. Nevertheless, I would argue that "empathic learning contexts" (Arnold, 2005, p. 162) are distinctive in character, fostering environments in which hope often triumphs over despondency, personal satisfaction from learning is celebrated and transformative learning becomes possible.

## **2.7 Autonomous versus Relational Knowing: A False Dichotomy**

Taylor (1998) argues that Mezirow, in his explication of transformative learning theory, has "given only minor attention" to relational knowing, or the role of relationships in the learning process (p. 36). Although relationships are implicit in Mezirow's emphasis on the importance of rational discourse, Taylor (1998) posits that, in general, Mezirow "has tended to give less attention to the more subjective elements of relationships (trust, friendship, support) and their impact on transformative learning" (p. 36). By contrast, as Edward Taylor (2000) points out, other researchers have emphasised the importance of elements of relationships in the process of transformation. These include:

modeling (Bailey, 1996; Brooks, 1989; Hunter, 1980), interpersonal support (Morgan, 1987), social support (Van Nostrand, 1992), family connections (Pope, 1996), networking (Elias, 1993; Schlesinger, 1983), learning-in-relationship (Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994), friendships (First and Way, 1995; Holt, 1994; Taylor, 1993, 1994), and developing trust (Egan, 1985; Gehrels, 1984; Saavedra, 1995) (Edward Taylor, 2000, pp. 306-307).

Taylor (1998) acknowledges the importance of all of these relational elements:

It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the necessary openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, which is essential for managing the threatening and emotionally charged experience of transformation. Without the medium of relationships, critical reflection is impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection (p. 37).

The value of mentoring in stimulating individuals to think critically and to engage in self-reflection has also received considerable attention. At the heart of successful mentoring is an awareness that profound transformation is not an autonomous experience but a relational one. According to Kerka (1998) and Schwiebert (2000), the essence of mentoring is the establishment of beneficial interpersonal relationships based upon effective communication. Debolt (1992) and Bond (1999) see the mentor's role in the learning process as being both to support and challenge the learner. The connections between metacognition, self-reflection and mentoring have also generated interest amongst researchers (Forrest-Pressley, MacKinnon and Waller, 1985; Flavell, 1987; Hine and Ismail, 1997) and some have recognised that being mentored may be "a transformative process" (Restaino-Keller and Moss Handle, 1996, p. 291).

Robertson (1996) states that "in general, research has ignored the dynamic intersubjective interplay of the lived experience of teachers and learners" (p. 47). This study seeks to highlight the crucial role of relationships in the transformative learning process. These include relationships between students as peers and between students and their teacher. Whilst acknowledging that ultimately transformation takes place within individuals, the study explores the extent to which challenging, supportive relationships, based on trust and mutual respect, may foster learning that is transformative. In Chapter 4, the nature of relationships in a dialogic classroom is explored and in Chapter 5, the value of peer mentor relationships is examined.

## **2.8 Individual versus Social Transformation and the Issue of Power**

The role that relationships play in the process of transformation is linked to the issue of whether transformative learning is simply a phenomenon occurring within individuals and influencing individuals' future actions, or whether the role of transformative learning should be to see individuals galvanised for action in order to transform society. The relationship of transformative learning to social action and power has generated a great deal of discussion (Freire, [1970] 1993); Collard and Law, 1989; Cunningham, 1992; Griffin, 1987; Hart, 1990a, 1990b; Newman, 1993, 1994).

Mezirow has been criticised for his emphasis on personal, rather than social transformation and for his failure to directly address issues of power in his theory of transformative learning. Collard and Law (1989) object to what they perceive to be Mezirow's emphasis on individual perspective transformation and his concomitant failure to recognise the "social environment in which structural inequalities are entrenched" (p. 105). Freire (1993) is also more concerned about social transformation than personal transformation, as is Cunningham (1998). She views transformative learning from a sociological, not a psychological perspective and is critical of the North American concept of the individual, which she argues "is almost disembodied from the society which frames her consciousness or provides cultural meaning to existence" (Cunningham, 1998, p. 15). Cunningham (1998) goes on to argue that it is in the "social space provided by social movements that knowledge and power can be accessed by the common person" (p. 22). Drawing on Dykstra and Law (1994), Cunningham highlights the importance of this "pedagogy of mobilization" (Cunningham, 1998, p. 23).

Collard and Law (1989) draw attention to the fact that emancipatory discourse, a fundamental tenet of Mezirow's model, ideally involves a relationship of equality among all participants, yet the adult educator's role is clearly not always one of equality with adult learners. Hart's (1990a) concerns about Mezirow's theory of transformative learning also revolve around issues of power and inequality. She questions Mezirow's neglect of the issue of power, given the centrality of



interaction and communication in his model. Hart (1990a) indicates that Mezirow implicitly claims that the educator can be outside a power-bound, and therefore distorted, context. She argues that this is a difficult claim to make “when power, and distorted forms of interaction and communication are placed at the center of one’s educational program” (Hart, 1990a, p. 136). The social dimension of transformative learning is also important to Tennant (1993). He argues that adult development is socially constructed and that “what is, and what is not, more integrative of experience depends on the social and historical context in which experience occurs” (Tennant, 1993, p. 37).

In response to some of these explicit and implicit criticisms of his view of transformative learning, Mezirow (1989) points out that he sees perspective transformation as an individual, group, or collective phenomenon. He emphasises the autonomy of the learner and stresses that any decision to take social action must be made by the learner, not the educator. If the educator’s intention is to effect a certain political action from a learner or group of learners, this would amount to indoctrination (Mezirow, 1989, p. 172). Mezirow (1989) makes it perfectly clear that transformative learning is evident in subsequent action (of a personal or social kind). If the transformation has altered an adult’s view of society and social structures so that that adult realises their need to act socially or politically, this would be entirely in keeping with his view of the need for appropriate actions to occur after a perspective transformation. According to Mezirow’s (1991) model, the tenth phase of perspective transformation is a “reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (p. 169). This may, or may not, involve social action. Moreover, although Mezirow

does not explicitly define or discuss types of power, an awareness of power seems to underlie his theory. In fact, Mezirow’s reluctance to suggest that the educator deliberately influence learners’ decisions to engage in social change shows his sensitivity to the power inherent in the educator’s role (Cranton, 1994, p. 54).

Wilson and Kiely (2002) discuss some contributors to the field who, in recent times, have sought to “move us beyond the dominant theoretical and practical

parameters of transformational theory as currently constituted” (p. 4). One of these contributors is Welton (1995), whose work seeks to promote “the centrality of emancipatory adult learning theory to social transformation and human freedom” (Wilson and Kiely, 2002, pp. 1-2). Hart’s (1992, 2001) work exploring “how capitalistic and patriarchal power relations distort female consciousness” and Tisdell’s (1998, 2001) “poststructuralist focus on the construction of identity in interlocking systems of gender, race, and class” also receive attention (Wilson and Kiely, 2002, p. 4). Finally, they explore Brookfield’s (2000, 2002) recent work that, through “returning to the historical roots of ideological critique in the first generation thinkers of the Frankfurt School, has taken transformational theory in more overtly politicized directions by repositioning ideological critique as central to transformative learning” (Wilson and Kiely, 2002, p. 4).

In the context of my area of interest – an exploration of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy within a high school English context – the question of individuals’ perspective transformations leading to social change seems a less prominent issue than in the context of adult learning. This is primarily because the strictures of school life quite obviously limit students’ capacity for significant social action. Even Freire, whose work revolves around the need for social change, acknowledges that “systemic or formal education, in spite of its importance, cannot really be the lever for the transformation of society” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 129). Nevertheless, it is true that the perspective transformations experienced by students while they are still at school may well sow seeds for social action in their adult lives, and may even be given some form of embryonic expression while they are still at school. Furthermore, the principle of living out, or acting upon, a new perspective is as relevant for high school students as it is for adults. Finally, the dialogic approach to pedagogy explored throughout this thesis rests on the belief that transformative learning may be experienced when students become aware of, and make explicit, their implicit ideologies. In this process, they also become aware of how their views resonate with, or differ from, the views of others, and how their views may benefit from reconsideration. (For further discussion on the nature of dialogic learning, see Chapter 4). The study of literature in a dialogic English classroom draws attention to the multiplicity of perspectives that may be elicited from texts

and encourages interactive exploration of these texts. A consideration of social change may not be central to this exploration, but an awareness of the ways in which ideologies may differ, and may be shaped, most certainly is.

The issue of power is a significant one in relation to transformative learning in a high school context. For significant transformative learning to occur with learners of any age, the concerns of Freire (1993), Cunningham (1992; 1998), Hart (1990a, 1990b) and others about the possible impediment to transformative learning caused through an educator adopting a position of power over learners are very real. When working with school age students it is arguably even more difficult to entirely eliminate all manifestations of the power relationship than when working with adults. For a teacher of high school students interested in fostering transformative learning in his or her students through transformative pedagogy, the challenge is to lay aside the often acceptable hierarchical structure based on power, in favour of an approach to learning designed to empower the students themselves. This needs to occur whilst acknowledging, as Brookfield (2000) points out, that the teacher *does* hold a position of power (p. 137). Transformative pedagogy is about the teacher consciously limiting the coercive dimensions that positions of power may involve. In the end, perspective transformations of an individual must be fully owned by the learner, not by the educator. As Hart (1990a) says,

to espouse a concept of emancipatory education binds one to the full range of its practical implications. It therefore signifies a fundamental commitment to struggle against the blinding and distorting effects of power in as many ways as are appropriate or possible, and a commitment to help create non-oppressive communities (p. 136).

A transformative educator seeks to foster such emancipatory learning contexts. In her article on transformational learning, Clark (1993) presents Daloz's exploration of how change is experienced by adults:

His answer is that development is facilitated by a relationship of care between teachers and their students. He argues that growth is a risky and frightening business, much like a journey into the unknown. Students are challenged to let go of old conceptualizations of self and their world and to embrace new

understandings; the presence of a knowledgeable and caring teacher or mentor makes such a journey into the unknown less frightening. Mentors facilitate this growth by providing support, challenge, and vision. Daloz's goal is to challenge teachers to think about their teaching not so much in terms of developing competencies but rather in terms of fostering personal development (p. 49).

## **2.9 Fostering Transformative Learning Through Transformative Pedagogy**

### **2.9.1 The Value of Transformative Learning and Transformative Pedagogy: Different Perspectives**

Since transformative learning involves such profound shifts within an individual and since these shifts come about as a result of personal experience and reflection upon that experience, it would seem plausible that this type of learning would be regarded as desirable. However, this is not always the case. Magro (2002-03), in her study of the conceptualizations adult literacy educators have about the teaching-learning process within the framework of transformative learning theory, gave the example of Mary, a community college Adult Basic Education teacher, who expressed the view that

“adult educators have no business trying to transform students...that's a very personal and political matter. It's also patronizing to think that as a teacher I can teach these students about the world in which they live. I would never presume that a student cannot think deeply or critically. There is a certain arrogance in a philosophy that extols the view that 'we know what a good society is'.” (p. 28).

It is indeed ironic that the term “transformative learning” may evoke images of arrogant control over learners, when advocates of transformative pedagogy, and those who have been responsible for developing and refining transformative learning theory, express a desire to see learners take control of their *own* lives. Mezirow (1991), for example, argues that some of the basic goals of adult education should include “helping learners to be self-guided, self-reflective, and rational and helping to establish communities of discourse in which these qualities are honored and fostered” (p. 224). This emphasis on helping others to become

more autonomous, and less controlled by influences they may not even be aware of, is also the focus of those who place an emphasis on social, rather than individual, transformation (Freire, 1993; Collard and Law, 1989; Cunningham, 1992, 1998). Freire (1993), for example, denounces the now well known “banking” concept of education, “in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 53). Freire (1993) goes on to argue that in this model of education

it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p. 53).

In the adult education arena, transformative learning is generally recognised as a liberating form of learning that is beneficial to the individual even though, as Taylor (1998) suggests, not all individuals are predisposed to engage in transformative learning. As Robertson (1997) has pointed out, “many professors seem to place a high value on being a part of students acquiring a certain insight that places them on a new level of understanding regarding the topic – or even life in general” (p. 109). He suggests that a “favored goal of perhaps every college teacher who takes teaching seriously is to facilitate the “aha” experience in a learner – to help the learner gain such profound insight about a topic that his or her perspective moves to a dramatically more empowered level” (Robertson, 1997, p. 105). I would suggest that this is a strongly felt desire amongst many teachers who take high school teaching seriously, too.

The distinction between a “reproductive conception of learning” and a “transformative conception of learning” has received some consideration (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Säljö, 1979; Entwistle, 1998; Brownlee, Purdie and Boulton-Lewis, 2003). Students with a reproductive conception of learning have been found to engage in surface level processing, such as memorising text, without engaging much in reflection upon the process of learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976). By contrast, students who conceive learning as a meaning-making process

are more likely to engage in deep approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Säljö, 1979) and to actively transform and construct concepts. In this context, Brownlee, Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003) clarify the meaning of a “deep approach to learning” by explaining that it “refers to both the intention to gain meaning (intrinsic motivation) and strategies used to process information at the meaning or semantic level” (p. 111). In my experience, “aha” moments experienced by students occur when they engage in deep approaches to learning flowing from a transformative conception of pedagogy. The vicarious delight that educators experience as a result of being a part of such moments in their students’ lives is reflective of their own transformative conception of learning. (After all, it is, in my view, difficult to get deeply excited by students memorising slabs of a text).

Barone (1989) argues that, in general, teachers “have lost – indeed, have been systematically encouraged to lose – the ability to reach out to honor the places (whether the barrio, the ghetto, the reservation, the Appalachian “holler”, or simply the peaks and pits of adolescence) where our students live” (p. 87). He goes on to argue that

a restructuring that gives teachers the time, the resources, and the motivation to learn about the individual worlds of their students will be only a beginning. Empathy alone is not enough. It is merely a necessary condition for a second element crucial to good teaching: the development of educational activities that can broaden students’ horizons (p. 87).

Perhaps it is just a matter of semantics, but I would argue that a commitment to “the development of educational activities that can broaden students’ horizons” – indeed, that are designed to be potentially transformative – is not an adjunct to empathy, but an integral part of what it means to be an empathic and transformative educator. Taylor (1998) highlights that only in recent times “has the practice of transformative pedagogy been explored empirically in any depth” (p. 46). Transformative pedagogy involves the thoughtful consideration of the educational approaches that may potentially lead to transformative learning. But it also involves an awareness on the part of the educator that the personal qualities and relationships they model, and that they foster in their students, are even more

vital to the transformative learning process. The word “pedagogy” has been used to mean many things. Van Manen (1982b) argues that pedagogy “is not found in philosophy, but like love or friendship it is to be found in the experience of its presence – that is, in concrete, real life situations. It is here and here and here, where an adult does something right in the personal becoming of a child” (p. 284). Inherent in this meaning is the desire for the educator to foster transformation. In this study, the term “transformative pedagogy” is used to refer to any of the personal qualities, relational dynamics and approaches to teaching and learning that may foster transformative learning.

Robertson (1997) states:

In adult education, the images of exemplary educators – for instance, Belenky et al.’s midwife (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), Brookfield’s skillful teacher (Brookfield, 1990), Daloz’s mentor (Daloz, 1986), Freire’s partner (Freire, 1993), Knowles’s andragogue (Knowles, 1975, 1989; Knowles & Associates, 1984), and Mezirow’s emancipatory educator (Mezirow, 1991) – clearly favor transformative learning over simple learning (Robertson, 1996) (p. 109).

Although these images of exemplary educators highlight their supportive, empathic role, those who consider themselves to be transformative educators nevertheless acknowledge the importance of planning and instigating challenging experiences that may trigger a perspective transformation in learners. These experiences may be painful for learners, but without them the disequilibrium necessary to provoke perspective transformation may never occur. As Robertson (1997) states, “Typically, professors who regard themselves as transformative educators attempt to create experiences that purposefully challenge the functionality of the learner’s current perspective. In doing so, willy-nilly they encounter the learner’s resistance head on” (p. 111).

### **2.9.2 Creating Disorienting Dilemmas**

Mezirow (1991) describes the first phase of perspective transformation as “a disorienting dilemma” (p. 168). This is an experience that causes disequilibrium

in an individual, triggering a degree of discomfort that ultimately propels them to engage in critical self-reflection, resulting in perspective transformation. Kathleen Taylor (2000) describes a disorienting dilemma as “some experience that problematizes current understandings and frames of reference” (p. 155). In the ordinary course of life, an unwelcome “disorienting dilemma” may confront an individual without any other individual consciously seeking to trigger it. Following this, there may be an initial reaction period “when the self attempts to draw from the old assumptions to explain the disorienting dilemma” (Courtenay, Merriam and Reeves, 1998, p. 77). This period is important because “for transformation to occur, the individual must recognize that the old assumptions are inadequate for making sense of the present dilemma” (p. 78). A catalytic event, either external or internal, may then trigger an individual to let go of old assumptions and to begin the process of transformation. Courtenay, Merriam and Reeves (1998), in their study of the way in which HIV- positive adults have made meaning from their experiences, demonstrate that for some individuals confronting an unwelcome disorienting dilemma, other people become “catalytic agents” of change. This may be by providing them with the support they need, or by challenging them to make meaning out of their situation (p. 71).

Whilst disorienting dilemmas may spontaneously present themselves to individuals in everyday life, in pedagogical contexts, such as those forming the basis of this study, in order for learners to experience transformative learning, a disorienting dilemma may need to be posed by the educator. This may take many forms. In broad terms, Cranton (2002) expresses the view that it is an “environment of challenge that underlies teaching for transformation” (p. 66). She acknowledges that “this challenge must be combined with safety, support, and a sense of learner empowerment” but stresses that “it is, at the center, a challenge of our beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives that leads us to question ourselves” (Cranton, 2002, p. 66).



### **2.9.3 The Application and Testing of Ideal Learning Conditions for Transformative Learning**

This thesis presents my attempts to challenge students in a variety of ways, my aim being to prompt them to reconsider their sometimes limited and distorted assumptions of others, of the world and, most importantly, of themselves. Most frequently, students' assumptions about their capacities as learners were challenged. The extent to which this transformative pedagogy was effective varied, but in subsequent chapters I attempt to illustrate the nature of learning and pedagogy that resulted in transformation for a number of my students. In his discussion of many of the studies into transformative learning, Edward Taylor (2000) indicates that since about 1990, "there has been an increase of interest in understanding how transformative learning can be fostered in an educational setting" (p. 312). He also draws attention to the fact that "none of these studies involved the actual application and testing of the ideal learning conditions outlined by transformative learning theory" (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 312). In the ensuing chapters, I hope to show evidence of the application and testing of some of these ideal conditions, arguing that they may form, at least in part, transformative pedagogy.

### **2.10 The Intention and Organisation of This Study**

This thesis presents my developing insights into the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy in a high school English context. At this point, it is important for me to highlight that I see the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy to be inextricably linked. What I mean by this is that if, for example, the nature of transformative learning is that it is relational and occurs through reflective discourse, then the nature of transformative pedagogy is to promote contexts in which learning is relational and may generate reflective discourse. This might mean modelling and fostering listening skills and relational qualities such as empathy. If the nature of transformative learning is that it involves critical reflection of assumptions and critical self-reflection of assumptions, then transformative pedagogy will involve fostering the skills of critical reflection and self-reflection in students. This may

mean encouraging students to engage in reflective writing through keeping a learning log or journal. As a teacher-researcher interested in exploring the nature of transformative learning in my students, I faced a dilemma or conundrum. If I waited for clear evidence of transformed frames of reference in my students before embarking on my research, then I would not be able to trace the phenomenon of transformative learning *as it occurred* in my students, but could only examine the phenomenon retrospectively. On the other hand, looking for evidence of transformative learning before there is any evidence that it will necessarily occur may seem a rather strange thing to do. Polanyi (1967) draws attention to the paradox of formulating a research problem about something that has not yet been discovered:

It is a commonplace that all research must start from a problem.... But how can one see a problem, any problem, let alone a good and original problem? For to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars.... All this is a commonplace; we take it for granted, without noticing the clash of self-contradiction entailed in it. Yet Plato has pointed out this contradiction in the *Meno*. He says that to search for the solution of a problem is an absurdity; for either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem; or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you cannot expect to find anything (pp. 21-22).

Polanyi (1967) goes on to offer a solution to the conundrum: “The kind of tacit knowledge that solves the paradox of the *Meno* consists in the intimation of something hidden, which we may yet discover” (pp. 22-23). My “intimation of something hidden”, in this case the fact that I had observed students experience what I suspected may be transformative learning, led me to engage in phenomenological research based on my own pedagogical practices and the learning of my students within two of my classes. This study did, therefore, begin with a belief that transformative learning may occur and that, based on previous research into transformative learning, certain pedagogical approaches, enabling conditions, personal qualities and relational dynamics – or what might be termed transformative pedagogy – may best foster transformative learning. The study examines these dimensions of transformative pedagogy in practice to establish the ways in which these dimensions may yield a clearer understanding of the nature

of transformative learning. In examining these dimensions of transformative pedagogy, signs of the capacity for the types of thinking, feeling and knowing conducive to transformative learning became evident in some students. Furthermore, these dimensions of transformative pedagogy in action facilitated transformed meaning schemes and transformed frames of reference in some students so that, on occasions, these dimensions yielded, in isolation, evidence of transformative learning. In Chapters 4 to 7, it is not, however, my primary intention to demonstrate transformed meaning perspectives in my students as they engaged in particular activities or related in particular ways. Primarily, these chapters seek to highlight transformative pedagogy, or the types of enabling experiences, relational dynamics and qualities that, when working in concert, may foster transformative learning. Cranton (2002) states:

There are no particular teaching methods that guarantee transformative learning....Often, neither we as teachers nor the transforming student can pinpoint just what initiated or sustained the process. A lot of what happens is within the student, and the teacher just happens to say or do something that hooks into that person's thoughts or feelings (p. 66).

Nevertheless, there is a growing interest in the ways in which transformative learning may be fostered but, as Edward Taylor (2000) points out, "how transformative learning is promoted and facilitated in a typical classroom is still poorly understood" (p. 318). I hope that this study may add to the discussion of ways in which transformative learning may be fostered in the classroom. Edward Taylor (2000) also focuses on the need for research to "develop a microfocus on the variety of variables that affect the process of transformative learning" (pp. 322-323). Having established my research methodology in Chapter 3, each of Chapters 4 to 8 of this study may be seen to constitute just such a microfocus. The key dimensions of transformative learning that this study explores are: the value of dialogic learning and reflective discourse; the importance of critical reflection and self-reflection upon assumptions; the significance of affective and cognitive dimensions in the transformative learning process; and the importance of self-directed learning as a means of fostering transformative learning.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I focus on some of the relational dimensions of the transformative learning process. In Chapter 4, I explore the challenges posed by a dialogic classroom, arguing that in this type of classroom reflective discourse of the kind described by Mezirow (2000) is fostered. Brookfield's (1990) strategy of critical questioning is one way for the educator to challenge students' assumptions but within the context of a dialogic classroom, students also learn to challenge one another. They learn that their voices are valued but also that others have the right to challenge their assumptions. In the light of emergent alternative perspectives, they may choose to transform their views. As students engage in peer mentoring, they are again exposed to alternative viewpoints and learn to offer and receive alternative viewpoints. An exploration of peer mentor relationships, their capacity to foster reflective discourse and the affective dimensions of these relationships that may help to foster transformative learning, forms the focus of Chapter 5.

In addition to the relational dimensions of transformative learning explored in Chapters 4 and 5, I explore in Chapters 6 and 7 other ways in which critical reflection and self-reflection might be fostered. Chapter 6 addresses my attempts to encourage critical reflection and self-reflection in my students through asking them to engage in the practice of reflective writing through keeping a learning log (or journal). In Chapter 7, I examine the stimulus to critical reflection and self-reflection that is posed by engaging with, and composing, literary texts. Cranton (2002) calls this "creating an activating event" (p. 66). She states, "In order to bring about a catalyst for transformation, we need to expose students to viewpoints that may be discrepant with their own" (Cranton, 2002, p. 66). Encouraging students to engage with literary texts is one way of exposing them to alternative viewpoints.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I explore the ways in which students responded to being set demanding self-directed learning tasks, arguing that the tasks functioned as disorienting dilemmas that in some instances proved to be the catalyst for transformation in students. At this point, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Chapter 8 is distinctly different, in one important respect, from Chapters 4 to 7. As in Chapters 4 to 7, in Chapter 8 the focus is a discussion of a dimension of learning that is ideally suited to fostering transformative learning: self-directed

learning. However, in Chapter 8 it is clear that this learning process, in and of itself, resulted in several students moving from one view of self as learner to a transformed view of self as learner. Having traced the journey of my students in two classes from the moment they were given a major, challenging self-directed learning project until its completion, I am able to provide clear evidence for the fact that self-directed learning triggered transformative learning in several of my students. This is a long chapter, as I wish to provide a detailed analysis of the stages of the transformative learning process experienced by students. Over the course of these self-directed learning projects, students engaged in, or drew upon, all the dimensions of the transformative learning process delineated in Chapters 4 to 7. It is in Chapter 8 that the value of the dimensions outlined in Chapters 4 to 7 is most clearly evident. The primary focus of Chapter 8 is the explication of what I have termed The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning.

Chapter 9 draws together the seminal findings of this research, explores some of the implications of these findings and makes suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Methodology Mosaic: Piecing Together a Path for Discovery**

*Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising that tempt you to believe your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires some of the same courage that a soldier needs.*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

#### **3.1 Nothing Comes From Nothing: The Research Question, Tacit Knowing and Reflection-In-Action**

My research question emerged as a result of my experiences as a teacher of high school students in the context of the classrooms in which we studied English literature together. The process of transformation in some of my students was intriguing to me but I was equally curious to explore why others did not appear to experience transformation. When I embarked on my research, I was aware that some of my past students had experienced transformative learning and yet, if questioned, I knew I could not adequately articulate, in any specific sense, the nature of this transformative learning or of my pedagogical approaches that may have had some role in fostering this learning. Schön (1987) refers to this tacit understanding and these intuitive responses as “*knowing-in-action*”, where “the knowing is *in* the action. We reveal it by our spontaneous, skillful execution of the performance; and we are characteristically unable to make it verbally explicit” (p. 25).

My desire to more fully understand and to make explicit the phenomena that I felt that some of my students and I were experiencing prompted me to frame my research question:

**What is the nature of transformative learning and  
transformative pedagogy in a high school English context?**

I wanted to examine more closely and, as much as possible, openly, without preconceptions, the nature of the teaching and learning dynamic that I believed had the capacity to transform those who engaged in it. Van Manen (1997) highlights the importance of researchers genuinely opening themselves to the possibilities that may emerge as a research question is explored fully and without preconceptions:

The essence of the question, said Gadamer (1975), is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities (p. 266). But we can only do this if we can keep ourselves open in such a way that in this abiding concern of our questioning we find ourselves deeply interested (inter-esse, to be or stand in the midst of something) in that which makes the question possible in the first place. To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being (p. 43).

Whilst I wanted to be open to the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, I was also conscious that the very process of formulating my research question meant that I was coming to this research with some preconceptions. I inevitably had hunches about pedagogy; intuitions about what caused my students to grow and change; inklings about how my interactions with students may be helpful or unhelpful to them as individuals and collectively. It was this tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1967) that drove my quest to explore the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. At a fundamental level, I was engaged in heuristic inquiry which, as Moustakas (1990) explains, is

a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries (p. 9).

As a reflective practitioner, I wanted to better understand the nature of transformation, in order that I might foster it more consciously and adroitly in future pedagogical contexts. As Jarvis (1999) says, the very act of “problem posing means that reflective practitioners are not just responsive to the changing conditions of their practice; they are proactively asking questions about it. They

create their own problems, or disjuncture, so they are agents as well as recipients of the forces of change..." (p. 67).

I believed that "it is sometimes possible, by observing and reflecting on our actions, to make a description of the tacit knowing implicit in them" (Schön, 1987, p. 25). In delineating his notion of reflection-in-action, Schön (1983) states that

both ordinary people and professional practitioners often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. Stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back on action and on the knowing which is implicit in action.... There is some puzzling, or troubling, or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action (p. 50).

My interactions with seven Year 8 students (13 and 14 year old boys) with whom I embarked on an enrichment program, two years before I embarked on this research, sparked my curiosity about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. In this program I encouraged these students to develop their own Major Work (or long essay of 3 000 - 4 000 words) on a literary topic of their choice. It was through their experiences of independent investigation, and my own experiences of facilitating the process, that new ideas about the nature of transformation began to emerge for me. Throughout the process of working on this self-directed learning project, these students confronted various obstacles and experienced a range of emotions. Nevertheless, by the completion of the Major Work, they were all more self-reflective, more self-confident and less daunted by the prospect of embarking upon tasks of a similar nature in the future. My surprise at the extent to which these students demonstrated signs of transformation led me to question the nature of transformative learning and of the pedagogical approaches that may foster it. As the intensity of this questioning grew, I decided to enrol in a research degree in order to explore it more fully. Schön (1983) posits:

Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive, spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results expected for it, then we tend not to think about it.



But when intuitive performance leads to surprise, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflecting-in-action (p. 56).

It was my surprise at the changes in these Year 8 students, albeit surprise that took the form of a gradual dawning, that prompted my desire to scrutinise the learning and pedagogy that I was tacitly aware was in some senses transformative.

### **3.2 The Two Shall Become One: The Symbiotic Nature of the Teacher-Researcher**

In searching for a useful research methodology, I was conscious that I was both researcher and teacher simultaneously. My motivation for engaging in research was my desire to more fully understand the nature of transformative learning in order that I might better foster this type of learning in the future. I was mindful of van Manen's (1982a) perspective: "Theory is good to the extent that it serves or eulogizes the good" (p. 48). The extension of this view is that

the pedagogical function of edifying theory is that it draws our attention to the relationship between a particular occurrence in our pedagogic lives with children and the essence of pedagogy, of which the occurrence is a reflection. Pedagogical theorizing as an edifying project understands itself as the hermeneutics of the spontaneously experienced meanings in our educational lives and of the interpretations which present themselves with respect to this lived experience (van Manen, 1982a, p. 47).

To argue that pedagogical theory is "good" if it serves children is, of course, to postulate a moral argument. Van Manen (1982b) elsewhere presents the view that pedagogy itself can be judged to be competent or otherwise, arguing that

pedagogic competence involves a form of praxis (thoughtful action: action full of thought and thought full of action) wherein the requirements of the pedagogic existentials are actualized in real and concrete situations....

And pedagogic competence involves the anticipatory and reflective capacity of fostering, shaping, and guiding the child's emancipatory growth into adulthood (p. 293).

Chronologically, I was first a teacher engaged in “a form of praxis”. I later became a researcher, but I became aware that these two roles (or selves) were inextricably connected, the “selves” melding through a process of constant reflexivity. In combination, they formed an integrated self that was capable of more meaningful teaching and research than if either “self” was functioning without the other. I make these claims with some trepidation, since many educational researchers, particularly of a positivist persuasion, would balk at them, fearing that they smack of subjectivity not conducive to rigorous, valuable research. They are statements borne from my experience, and reflection upon experience, for over the course of my research I frequently pondered the nature of the teacher-researcher and the implications of my identity as a teacher-researcher for both my teaching and research.

One compelling argument for encouraging teachers to conduct research in areas central to their practice is that the fusion of the roles of teacher and researcher necessitates a deep attunement to, and reflection on, practice that may ultimately transform it for the good of the students and the teacher alike. Perhaps my candour matches that of the boy who questioned the emperor without any clothes when I ask, What is the point of educational research – as statistically accurate and enlightening as it may be – if the findings never really have any direct impact on future pedagogical choices made by teachers at the coalface? Even when research findings are analysed by practicing teachers, I would argue that the impact is often not as great as when discoveries are made and written about by practicing teachers themselves. Stenhouse (1975) recognises the value of teacher-research in promoting the quality of teaching and learning when he argues that

it is difficult to see how teaching can be improved or how curricular proposals can be evaluated without self monitoring on the part of teachers. A research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved (p. 165).

Nevertheless, Cole and Knowles (2000) acknowledge the still entrenched perception, in many quarters, of the divide between educational theory and practice:

The existence of a theory-practice gap that separates the real world of practice from the ivory tower of the university or laboratory is a prevalent notion long-held by school- and university-based practitioners alike. This traditional dichotomous conceptualization of theory and practice locates theory generation and the study of educational theories (and, by extension, knowledge) within the context of the university and recognizes the field as the site of practice and practical action that is neither informed nor guided by theory (p. 9).

They go on to critique this view:

The position that theory and practice are distinct entities that bear little relationship to one another reflects problematic assumptions about the two dimensions of knowledge, and these need to be examined and challenged. Such an either/or view sets up misguided and inappropriate frameworks for understanding teaching and guiding ongoing career-long teacher development (Cole and Knowles, 2000, p. 10).

Jarvis (1999) expresses similar concerns about the demarcation between theory and practice:

The idea that theory should be applied to practice is increasingly being recognized as an oversimplification, at the least, and at the most, as false. Many practitioners are now conducting their research, even though it is not always referred to as such, and much of it does not get incorporated into their profession's body of knowledge (p. 3).

Teacher-research has the transforming potential to rejuvenate pedagogical staleness, to refresh and inspire teachers and to function as a catalyst for meaningful collegial discourse in learning communities. The ripple effect of such activity is boundless. Cole and Knowles (2000) suggest that reflexive practice is the key to bridging the gap between theory and practice:

Reflexive practice comes about by melding the two kinds of theory and processes of theory generation, that is, by considering elements of general theories in the context of one's own particular theories. As such, teachers are both theory generators and theory users.... Inquiring teachers are intent on revealing theory-practice dichotomies for purposes of self-awareness and improvement (pp. 10-11).

Over time, teacher-research has gained credibility in academic arenas, and indeed has come to be valued by many, as Loughran et al. (2002) acknowledge:

Fortunately, teacher research has slowly gained a 'foothold' in the academic literature through the work of advocates such as Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992), who pushed a strong line of argument about teacher research as a way of knowing. An important aspect of their work was the inherent value in demonstrating that the knowledge base of teaching must inevitably include the teacher's perspective and, in so doing, be drawn from their experiences of their classrooms as that setting is the primary source of knowledge about teaching. It has been through the recognition of the importance of this argument that research has begun to be better valued in the two worlds that have a stake in the nature of teaching and learning – the worlds of theory and practice (p. 4).

### **3.3 The Deep and the Meaningful: Subjective Reality for Teacher-Researchers and Qualitative Research**

I had not been on the research journey for long before I discovered that some viewed the practice of teacher-research as too subjective or even too emotional. In combining the roles of teacher and researcher, some argued that my research may lack sufficient detachment. There was certainly the perception amongst some people who had previously engaged in quantitative research that in adopting qualitative research methods my research would be less rigorous or less useful because generalisations would not be possible. I was, however, encouraged by the growing acceptance of qualitative methodologies in academic arenas. In an address given to postgraduate research students entitled "Changing Times, Changing Methodologies. Selecting a Research Strategy", Baumgart (1997/1998) highlights what he perceives to be

an unfolding from previous detached, objective, highly structured approaches to research design to contemporary perspectives in which the research problem is contextualised in subjectivities stemming from blurred boundaries between researcher and subject with the personal reflections of both given voice in the finding (p. 41).

Historically, subjective approaches to research have been treated disparagingly. Indeed, the word “subjective” itself holds pejorative overtones in a range of contexts. As Jansen and Peshkin (1992) state, “In scholarly circles where ‘rigor’ reigns, the terms objective and objectivity still carry the stamp of acclaim and acceptance, whereas subjectivity does not” (p. 682).

Gelwick (1978), in his essay on what it means to be human, states, “The success of critical philosophy’s interpretation of modern science led to a world view of detachment and objectivism. Our personal importance in the process of knowing was downgraded and the human element became fragmented or lost” (p. 144). Gelwick (1978) argues that the two main streams of philosophy in the modern period, rationalism and empiricism, were distortions of human understanding: “Dividing the self into parts, separating body and mind, the whole was lost” (p. 144). He denounces the “dogma of objectivism”, beginning with the mechanism of Galileo and of Newton, and argues that the eclipse of the creative nature of the person has been evident in a range of disciplines, including science, philosophy, art and politics (Gelwick, 1978, pp. 144-147). In the latter stages of his essay, Gelwick turns to the more recent work of Polanyi which he argues provides a direct refutation of the ideal of objectivism. His summary of Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowing is helpful in this context:

Tacit knowing, then, is about the human capacity for learning routinely from what is already around us as knowledge and is also about what is yet to be discovered. Its structure admits that knowledge is a risk, but it also gives meaning and pattern that others can also share. Most importantly, it shows the responsibility and opportunity for the human person not only to indwell the received knowledge of the world but also to employ it as the foundation for further inquiry into truth. Truth is not found by giving up our personal involvement, but by recognizing our inherent involvement in all knowing and by accepting responsibility for it (Gelwick, 1978, p. 153).

Gelwick (1978) goes on to highlight two key features of Polanyi’s tacit knowing: “First, it explains how we use tradition to indwell and form the background for the problems to which we attend. Secondly, it explains how we pursue truth as a possibility greater than we can articulate at any moment” (p. 154). In the end, surely it is true that all research takes place via the medium of human

consciousness and therefore is inevitably subjective. Even scientific research that is reliant on quantitative methods is subjective in this sense. Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlights this when he states:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.... Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance qua form of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world (p. viii).

Merleau Ponty's reminder here that *all* researchers, not just teacher-researchers, gain knowledge from their own particular point of view is pertinent, as is the fact that this very involvement is what places the teacher-researcher in a position to make a real, significant and often immediate pedagogical difference. As Loughran et al. (2002) state:

Huberman (1996) criticised teacher research because of the difficulty of researching events in which one is a player. This overlooks one important issue – teacher-research attempts to improve classrooms. The complexity of classrooms means that no significant change to practice can be neatly planned in advance. A teacher-researcher can react to unexpected events with immediate changes to the new practice – often the reaction must be immediate. A teacher who is working with (or for) an outside researcher is likely to feel a need to consult first and the moment will be lost (p. 259).

The strengths of teacher-research are, in my opinion, far more significant than any challenges that may be confronted because teacher and researcher are one and the same. Arguably, the greater weakness in research stems from the belief that crucial, yet frequently ineffable aspects of pedagogy can be quantified by an outsider, and to some useful end. Van Manen (1982b) cautions that

positivism in educational research and theorizing suffers from a certain blindness. It mistakes categorical or operational instances of some rational conceptualization of pedagogy for the “real” thing. It fails to see that we cannot “see” pedagogy if “to see” means to observe operational or experimental instances of pedagogic teaching. It fails to see that the meaning and significance of pedagogy remains concealed behind our inability to approach pedagogy pretheoretically. It remains concealed as a

consequence of the theoretical overlays and perspectival frameworks we construct in the paradoxical effort to see more clearly the significance of certain pedagogic practices (usually called “teaching behaviors,” “curriculum effects,” etc.) (p. 291).

Van Manen (1982b) goes on to argue that this “blindness” is best corrected through acknowledging that deep reflection upon the nature of teaching and learning will often yield results which, whilst difficult to quantify, are nonetheless deeply illuminating: “Exactly because pedagogy is in an ultimate or definitive sense unfathomable, it poses the unremitting invitation to the creative activity of pedagogic reflection which brings the deep meaning of pedagogy to light” (p. 291).

So in spite of the fact that quantitative research arguably still has more widespread acceptance in academic circles than does qualitative research, I was reluctant to engage in quantitative research primarily because I did not believe that its methods would yield the sort of findings that would be useful to me (and, I hoped, others) in the context of future teaching practice. Nevertheless, I wanted my research to be scholarly and rigorous, as well as meaningful and useful. It was through extensive reading of educational theory that I was able to discover a path for my inquiry. As the methodological foundations for my research became clear, my initial qualms about potential lack of rigour subsided. I became aware that a methodology should not be a series of difficult hurdles over which a researcher must jump if he or she is to “get it right”, but a means to an end: a servant, not a master. As Smith (1999) argues,

the mark of good interpretative research is not in the degree to which it follows a specified methodological agenda, but in the degree to which it can show understanding of what it is that is being investigated. And “understanding” here is itself not a fixable category but rather it stands for a deep sense that something has been profoundly heard in our present circumstances (p. 41).

The need for qualitative research to be *useful* is highlighted by Mason (1996) who, in discussing qualitative research practitioners, argues that

what we should also do – and especially if we want our work to be taken seriously and perceived as convincing – is to ensure that we make sensible and informed decisions whose products will constitute a meaningful, coherent, intellectually compelling and practicable research strategy (p. 165).

As a teacher eager to explore the nature of transformation in my students in order that I might be more attuned to ways in which I might foster transformation in future pedagogical contexts, I wanted my research to richly describe and analyse the phenomena that would unfold before me. I knew that I would need to seek to capture the essence of personal moments of anguish and joy in my students. Even more than that, I would need to give voice to the full spectrum of emotions as they came to the surface in my students and in me. I also desired to seek to express something of the dynamic between students' experiences of transformation and my own. Inwardly, I had begun to ask the question, What is it about the way that I function as an educator, and indeed who I am as a person, that touches my students in ways that either foster or inhibit their personal transformation?, long before embarking on any formalised research program. It was clear to me that the nature of my research question meant that it would not be adequately addressed through statistical analysis or quantitative research of any kind. I knew that central to the uncovering and construction of meaning in my research context would be the medium of language, richly textured and finely nuanced. As I began to explore philosophical hermeneutics, and later hermeneutic phenomenology, I realised that I was moving closer to the discovery of a methodology that would suit my purposes. As Smits (1997) argues: "Hermeneutics offers the "reflexivity" required to see the falsity of the subjective-objective split. Research is not something that exists in totality outside of our own subjectivities" (p. 288).

In contemplating my research question, I began to ask a range of associated questions. Was I considering methods that would help me understand more about the nature of transformation in my students and me? Would I be able to make my insights accessible to others through clear and compelling use of language? In short, would my research be inherently meaningful? I wanted there to be a symbiotic relationship between my teaching practice and my research: for my research to ultimately lead to an improvement in my teaching practice and for the



thoughts and feelings emerging from my teaching and learning in the classroom and beyond to deeply imbue my research. I was aware that this is not always the case. As Smits (1997) states:

From a hermeneutic perspective, the notion of practice has become devalued in modernity as the application of theory and hence as a kind of technique. Action research, and a whole host of related trends in educational research – for example, collaborative research, teacher-as-researcher, professional-development schools – have emerged from the recognition that professionalized, university-based research has not necessarily functioned to improve the quality of education in schools, especially in terms of a theory into practice orientation (p. 290).

Schwandt (1996) expresses concern at the fact that all too often researchers replace a preoccupation with what it means to be a teacher or learner with a focus on the techniques, methods and procedures intended for use in the research process:

I am often disheartened by the fact that we persist in arguing about the tools of our practice without asking just what our practice might be about. In the social sciences, we are extremely fond of learning, applying, and teaching techniques, methods, and procedures for how to do inquiry. The penchant is so great, in fact, that the feminist theologian Mary Daly (1973) has coined the term “methodolatry” to refer to the worship of method. While we are busying ourselves with acquiring method expertise, we are paying too little attention to what it means to be an inquirer, or an educator, or an administrator, or a teacher for that matter. This is a practical (in an Aristotelian sense) and moral concern (p. 84).

In a similar vein, Ballard (1996) explores his personal transformation from being an advocate of exclusively quantitative methods of research, to his growing awareness of the shortcomings of such methods in certain contexts. His experience of transformation made a significant impact on me. Ballard’s account was encouraging to me because in it he revealed his growing awareness of the significance of the affective, often intangible and immeasurable aspects of teaching and learning. He began by giving an account of his training as a teacher, psychologist and researcher:

My introduction to a scientific worldview was through my training as a teacher, and later as a psychologist and researcher. It

seemed evident that ordinary people, with beliefs, doubts, and passions, had no place in educational or psychological research. There were subjects, who were useful for generating data, and researchers, who were impersonal recorders and manipulators of variables independent of themselves. I accepted this, despite having some exposure to investigations that did describe people and the complexity of their lives, and to researchers who wrote about themselves and their work (Ballard, 1996, pp. 26-27).

Ballard's perceptions began to shift when he was involved in teaching and research in applied behaviour analysis at the University of Otago in New Zealand. As part of a postgraduate course that he taught, he arranged student practicums so that his students could gain experience in behavioural instruction. This mostly involved work with adults who had an intellectual disability. Ballard's (1996) reflections on this work reveal his shifting perspective:

This work was undertaken using a research format, but as we wrote the journal accounts of behaviors observed and changed, I knew that there was always something missing. In particular, there was no record of the delight in this work that came from people supporting one another as they learned together, nor was there evidence of the informal student learning that occurred around disability issues. Eventually I wrote about the value of what I described as these "additional" student and client outcomes, but I experienced increasing discomfort about what I said we were doing – demonstrating effective behavioral instruction – and what I sensed was the really important part of our teaching – the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the learner, unmediated by the behavioral strategies (p. 28).

Ballard's (1996) experience caused him to seriously question his previous research paradigm:

It was disorienting to realize that my research perspective was doing more than eliciting a sensible, scientific caution in my work. It was, I felt, shutting me off from ordinary human judgment, experiences, emotions, and common sense that I wanted to be a part of (p. 29).

Ultimately, in spite of considerable opposition, Ballard resolved to embrace qualitative research methods in an attempt to feel a greater connection with the people and phenomena that were of interest to him in his research. He states: "Having experienced research as alienation, as estrangement from the people I set

out to understand, my personal need is for the uncertainty and complexity of ordinary interpersonal relationships” (Ballard, 1996, p. 31).

Like Ballard, as I began to search for a research methodology, and throughout the process of research, I was aware of the fact that my research was not going to provide definitive conclusions or certain, easily measurable results. The specific ontological and epistemological beliefs undergirding my inquiry defied such an outcome. I knew that living with and giving voice to ambiguities and uncertainties would be part of the process of discovery. As Diamond and Mullen (1999) argue, “Awareness, like self, is multiple and fragmented, divided against itself in the act of observing and being” (p. 5).

### **3.4 Phenomenology**

#### **3.4.1 The Wide World of Phenomenology**

My desire to better understand the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy led me to look more closely at what was happening in my classrooms. I wanted to discover what my students thought and felt about the ways in which they were learning. Did they feel that their experiences of studying English with me were impacting on them in ways that were transforming them? If so, in what ways? I also began to reflect more deeply on my own style of teaching. This included thinking about my preferences, about my values and about the ways in which I related to my students. I wanted to scrutinise the pieces of the mosaic that made up the teaching and learning dynamic between my students and me in order to more fully discover the nature of transformative learning. And I wanted to do this in order that I might foster transformative learning in my students in the future. Although I knew that there were already strategies that I was employing to that end, much of what I was doing was intuitive. I wanted to become more consciously aware of the pieces that, when placed together, might form the kind of teaching and learning environment that would foster significant transformation in my students.

As I explored phenomenology, in all its breadth, I came to realise that it would provide me with an approach to my explorations that would enable me to make discoveries that would be meaningful for me and, I hoped, others. In his comprehensive tome on the phenomenological movement, Spiegelberg (1982) states: “The first objective of the phenomenological approach is the enlarging and deepening of the range of our immediate experience” (p. 679). This expansion and deepening of my understanding of what transformation might mean in a pedagogical context was exactly what I desired. Spiegelberg (1982), in emphasising that phenomenology is primarily concerned with “emancipation from preconceptions” (p. 680), elaborates upon the essential hallmark of a phenomenological methodology:

“To the things themselves”(Zu den Sachen) has been the leitmotif of phenomenological research. Its interpretation may vary. But the common concern is that of giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them (p. 680).

As I began to roam the world of phenomenology and to become acquainted with some of its great proponents, it became clear that its scope is broad and that there are divergent opinions about all aspects of it, including even what constitutes true phenomenology in the first place. For my purposes, I came to realise that it was hermeneutic phenomenology that would best enable me to express my discoveries about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. Even more specifically, whilst I was influenced by a range of phenomenologists, whose thoughts I will acknowledge in this chapter, it was Max van Manen’s works on phenomenology and pedagogy (1979; 1982a; 1982b; 1985; 1997) that were most significant in my formulation of a suitable methodology.

It is not my intention to do in this chapter what Spiegelberg (1982) has done and to provide a history of the phenomenological movement. I will, however, highlight the aspects of phenomenology, as expounded by its various proponents, that have influenced me in the formulation of my own phenomenological methodology.

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) definition of phenomenology is, perhaps, a helpful starting point:

It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them (p. vii).

The idea of seeking to lay aside preconceptions in order to achieve "a direct and primitive contact with the world" is central to philosophical phenomenology. Whilst he was not without antecedents, the German philosopher, Husserl (1859-1938), is widely considered the father of philosophical phenomenology. In his introduction to Husserl's (1973) *Idea of Phenomenology*, Nakhnikian defines the essence of Husserl's philosophy:

To put it in a simple and summary fashion, the phenomenologist is in search of a "pure" or "reduced" object, the essence of a special thing or of a process, such as seeing. He supposes that the process is unclear and indistinct in its everyday context. In the case of seeing, the "pure" or "reduced" phenomenon would be seeing plus a cogitatio, an act of attention focused upon seeing, to find out what seeing is. In the natural, everyday context, there is simply seeing (p. XVIII).

Husserl's philosophical radicalism revolved around his attempts to get to the "roots" or the "beginnings" of all knowledge or to its ultimate foundations (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 76). He believed that the beginnings of knowledge could be found through turning to "the 'things', the *Sachen*, the phenomena in the customary sense, in which all our concepts are ultimately grounded" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 77). He was interested in the "essence" of things. This meant subscribing to what was termed phenomenological reduction or "bracketing". Spiegelberg (1982) explains that bracketing means

to detach the phenomena of our everyday experience from the context of our naïve or natural living, while preserving their

content as fully and as purely as possible. The actual procedure of this detachment consists in suspending judgment as to the existence or non-existence of this content. This by no means implies that we deny or even doubt its existence to the extent of writing it off, as Descartes had done (p. 709).

Despite his emphasis on the need to focus directly on the phenomena at hand, increasingly Husserl came to the conviction that the roots of knowledge

lay deeper, namely in the consciousness of the knowing subject to whom these phenomena appeared, i.e., in something which he later came to call “transcendental subjectivity.” Thus the “turn to the object” was supplemented by a “turn to the subject” by way of a new kind of reflection which left his erstwhile followers on the road to the “object” far behind (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 77).

The notion of laying aside my preconceptions about what may be central to transformative learning and transformative pedagogy was foundational to my methodology. I wanted to return to “the things themselves” in order to re-search, and ultimately to reveal the nature of these things. I was also aware that my discoveries would be *my* perceptions of phenomena or, as Husserl understood, that they would lie “in the consciousness of the knowing subject” to whom they appeared. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts it, “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth” (p. 13).

Macann (1993) posits that “if a single phrase were required as an epitaph for Husserl’s thought, it might be this: *Truth dwells in the inner man.*” (p. 54). I was aware that, in my context, pedagogical truth would emerge from within me, as I revisited the phenomena of my students’ learning experiences, my own teaching and learning experiences and the dynamic that existed between us. Indeed, I came to realise that my own transformation would begin with an attunement to the pedagogical lifeworlds in which I found myself day by day. The interpretation of these lifeworlds would follow after I had “seen” clearly, as if for the first time, what in another sense was already familiar. Greene (1978) captures the essence of my realisation when she argues that

it is profoundly important that those who hope to be critical educators remain in touch with their lived worlds, their pre-understandings, their perceptual landscapes.... Each one's life-history, in fact, is a history of emergences and transformations. Consciousness itself arises, writes Merleau-Ponty, in the realization that "I am able," meaning the realization that one can reach beyond what is immediate, make horizons explicit, and transcend what is first a field of presences towards other future fields (pp. 102-103).

### 3.4.2 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Having established the importance of returning to phenomena afresh, I knew that I would need to move beyond *experiencing* phenomena to the point where I also *interpreted* what was revealed. This would mean engaging in hermeneutic phenomenology, or the attempt "to interpret the 'sense' of certain phenomena" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 712). Heidegger perhaps most fully and explicitly subscribed to hermeneutic phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1962) applied Heidegger's (1993) hermeneutic phenomenology in a modified form and Gadamer (1975, 1986) and Ricoeur (1992) increasingly emphasised the importance of hermeneutics in their works. Dilthey (1996) explains the progression from observation of particular phenomena through hermeneutics to understanding: "Understanding arises when a series of inferences from particular to particular is placed in the service of intuition. When something external is given to me, I must supplement it with an inner thought process" (p. 230). Dilthey (1976) elaborates upon the nexus between experience and expression of experience in the process of developing understanding when he states that

we can only know ourselves thoroughly through understanding; but we cannot understand ourselves and others except by projecting what we have actually experienced into every expression of our own and others' lives. So man becomes the subject-matter of the human studies only when we relate experience, expression and understanding to each other...(p. 176).

The role of self-understanding in the process of understanding others is also emphasised by Dilthey (1976) when he states, "Understanding of other people and their expressions is developed on the basis of experience and self-understanding

and the constant interaction between them” (p. 218). This dialogic nature of hermeneutics is also encapsulated succinctly by Habermas (1972): “Hermeneutic understanding ties the interpreter to the role of a partner in dialogue. Only *this model of participation in communication learned in interaction* can explain the specific achievement of hermeneutics” (pp. 179-180).

### **3.4.3 Van Manen’s Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Human Science Research**

For my purposes, reflection upon, and interpretation of, the learning phenomena that unfolded before me as I looked upon them with fresh eyes was vital to my exploration of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. Writing about what I noticed was also crucial to the hermeneutic process. Van Manen’s (1997) attempt to “explicate a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing” (p. ix) particularly resonated with me in my capacity as a teacher-researcher. This is because I believe that meaningful teacher-research should involve careful observation of students’ experiences, and concentrated reflection upon these experiences. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to my research appealed to me because it enabled me to focus on the “pedagogic lifeworld” (van Manen, 1997, p. ix). The focus on discovery through writing that is integral to hermeneutic phenomenology also made sense to me. Indeed, van Manen (1997) argues that “interpretive phenomenological research and theorizing cannot be separated from the textual practice of writing” (p. ix). Elsewhere, van Manen (1982b) goes a step further when he links hermeneutic phenomenological research with “pedagogic competence” (p. 293), which he argues

manifests itself not only in praxis, in our concrete relationships, activities, and situations with children. It manifests itself as well in theorizing, where the parent or professional educator reflectively brings to speech the meaning of pedagogic thought and actions (pp. 293-294).

Not only is van Manen’s phenomenological model for research designed to serve students’ needs and to foster pedagogic competence, but by its very nature this



type of research fosters self-discoveries that are potentially transformative for the researcher. In van Manen's (1982b) words,

to theorize is to get to know oneself: Not in the superficial sense of self-awareness as reflected in the narcissistic literature of popular psychology, but in the phenomenological sense of anamnesis. To theorize is to struggle to achieve one's limits, to find one's origin, one's grounding in that which makes our pedagogic life possible (pp. 298-299).

The pedagogical approach articulated by van Manen, that of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human (as opposed to natural) science research, sprang from both the German tradition of "human science pedagogy" (the Dilthey-Nohl School) and the Dutch movement of "phenomenological pedagogy" (the Utrecht School). The German tradition "employed an interpretive or hermeneutic methodology" and the Dutch movement "was more descriptive or phenomenological in orientation" (van Manen, 1997, p. ix). Van Manen (1997) expresses his indebtedness to these German and Dutch traditions, but his major criticism of both of them is that they ignore questions of method and fail to consider how one is to undertake serious pedagogical scholarship (pp. ix-x).

According to van Manen (1997), hermeneutic phenomenology involves deep and rich description of lived experience but it also involves reflection upon this experience to determine essential themes, or what he calls "a ministering of thoughtfulness" (p. 12). Giving expression to this thoughtfulness is integral to the practice of hermeneutic phenomenology because

to do research in a phenomenological sense is already and immediately and always a bringing to speech of something....Experientially, language and thinking are difficult to separate. When I speak I discover what it is that I wished to say, says Merleau-Ponty (1973, p. 142) (van Manen, 1997, p. 32).

Van Manen's (1997) view is that through researching the possible meaning structures of our lived experiences, we come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be human (p. 12). In phenomenology, our inextricable connection to the world and our desire as researchers to want to know the world in which we live is called the principle of "intentionality" (van Manen, 1997, p. 5). We intentionally seek to

know more about certain dimensions of what it means to be human. Merleau-Ponty (1962) links this intentionality to the process of reflection:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical (p. xiii).

Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology is expressly concerned with pedagogical practice and for this reason, too, it strongly influenced my methodology. In van Manen's (1997) words:

Pedagogy requires a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the lifeworld in order to see the pedagogic significance of situations and relations of living with children. And pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact (p. 2).

As I embarked on my research, I wanted my experiences of teaching and learning to inform my emerging theory of transformative learning, rather than merely to apply transformative learning theory to my pedagogical context. My formulation of ideas about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy came about through reflection upon my interactions with my students and upon the phenomena that related to their individual and collective learning experiences. Van Manen (1982b) explains: "Our way of 'theorizing' or reflecting upon our pedagogic lives with children is phenomenological because phenomenology requires a continuously beginning anew, to return to the life world" (p. 288). Moustakas (1994) articulates the essence of phenomenology and human science inquiry when he states:

I must immerse myself totally and completely in my world, take in what is offered without bias or prejudgment. I must pause and consider what my own life is and means, in conscious awareness, in thought, in reflections. I enter into my own conscious reflections and meditations, open and extend my perceptions of life and reach deeper meanings and essences. This connectedness between what is out there, in its appearance and reality, and what

is within me in reflective thought and awareness, is in truth a wondrous gift of being human (p. 65).

### **3.5 The Scope of the Research**

As mentioned earlier, my curiosity about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy grew as a result of my involvement in a pilot enrichment program in which seven Year 8 students undertook a major self-directed learning task under my supervision. All the students were boys, as the school is for boys only in Years 3 to 9 (although it is co-educational in Years 10 to 12). The project involved the boys choosing a literary topic of interest to them and writing a long essay on it.

My research began two years later and, although the research question had relevance for all of my teaching practice, I chose to focus my attention on two of my English classes. In the first year of my research, I focused on my co-educational Year 10 English class, which was initially comprised of 23 students, although two of the students in this class, Jodie and Eric, left the school during the year. In the second year of my research, I focused on my co-educational Year 11 English class, which was initially comprised of 22 students, but one student, Belinda, left the class and moved to another class. Six of the students who were in the Year 10 class in the first year of my research were also in the Year 11 class in the second year of my research. This provided me with an opportunity to observe shifts in their perspectives over a longer period of time. Both these classes were top stream classes, although even given that this was the case, there was still a range of ability levels in the class as the streaming procedure was not without its flaws. It so happened that when I began my research, I was allocated this 10 AA English class. I thought this would be a good class upon which to focus my research as I wanted to examine the learning experiences of students who were in the senior school but who were not pressured by the demands of the final year of school when external examinations would be looming. I elected to focus on one class a year because I did not feel that I had the necessary time or energy to work full time and also to focus my research on all my classes. It was helpful to channel my attention towards a particular class. These students, in turn, became very

interested in my research. With the exception of the focus group interviews, all of my research methods were simultaneously part of my normal teaching practice and so students were not called upon to contribute to the study in ways that may have proved taxing to them, or that may have compromised their normal learning routine. Throughout my research I sought to operate ethically and professionally by placing students' needs first. I gained ethical clearance for their participation in the research near the beginning of the project and the research was not only approved of, but was encouraged by the headmaster of the school. As part of the ethics clearance, a letter explaining the nature of my research was sent home to students and to their parents. The students and their parents then signed a consent form, giving me permission to quote and analyse their verbal and oral responses in my research. (See Appendices A, B and C). At the time I was granted ethics approval, I was a candidate at the University of Sydney. Soon after, my supervisor and my candidature transferred to the University of Tasmania.

### **3.6 Turning the Kaleidoscope: Finding Helpful Research Methods**

#### **3.6.1 A Kaleidoscopic Vision**

In a broad sense, reading about and reflecting upon the nature of qualitative research and the human sciences was important in shaping my perception of the type of research I would undertake. My explorations into the nature of heuristic research and into hermeneutic phenomenology, especially as presented by van Manen, provided me with a more specific methodological path upon which to tread. In this section, I will delineate the methods that I chose to use in order to illuminate the lived experience of my interactions with my students. In the course of these interactions much more than I could ever hope to capture did, of course, occur, both outwardly and within the individuals involved. In discussing the process of phenomenological describing, Spiegelberg (1982) acknowledges that it

can never be more than selective: it is impossible to exhaust all the properties, especially the relational properties, of any object or phenomenon. But selection may be a virtue as well as a necessity. It forces us to concentrate on the central or decisive characteristics of the phenomenon and to abstract from its

accidentals. To this extent description already involves a consideration of essences...(p. 694).

My focus is therefore selective and is designed to reveal what I perceived to be the essential dimensions of the teaching and learning dynamic that fostered transformation in my students and in me. One way in which I came to a deeper understanding of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy was through paying close attention to the lifeworld of my pedagogical context. As van Manen (1997) states, "The lifeworld, the world of lived experience, is both the source and the object of phenomenological research" (p. 53). To more fully understand what was taking place in my classrooms, I also sought fresh and spontaneous input from my students. They provided me with their own perceptions about the teaching and learning process. This was vital to my research, for as van Manen (1979) points out, "the pedagogue must be sensitive to the ways in which the child himself experiences and defines the situation" (p. 14).

Van Manen (1997) explains that engagement in hermeneutic phenomenology does not involve collection of "data" in the traditional sense, but rather requires the researcher to gain insights through a range of means. He states that

we need to search everywhere in the lifeworld for lived-experience material that, upon reflective examination, might yield something of its fundamental nature....

In some respect it is quite misleading to talk of "data" in this context, particularly since the concept of "data" has quantitative overtones associated with behavioral and more positivistic social science approaches. And to speak of "gathering" and "collecting" human science data, as if one is speaking of "objective information," may admittedly be an attempt to borrow the respect that the so-called "hard" sciences have enjoyed. And yet it is not entirely wrong to say that the methods of conversational interviewing, close observation, etc., involve the collecting or gathering of data. When someone has related a valuable experience to me then I have indeed gained something, even though the "thing" gained is not a quantifiable entity (p. 53).

The metaphor of a kaleidoscope has been used to describe research methods because "depending on how they are approached, held, and acted toward, different

observations will be revealed” (Denzin, 1978, pp. 292-293). Patrick and Middleton (2002) highlight the importance of using a range of methods in qualitative research:

Different methodologies have different assumptions, emphases, priorities, and strengths and weaknesses, and accordingly they reveal different aspects of “reality”....

Reliance on any one method implies that researchers will continue viewing the constructs of interest from the same angle. By using a range of methods, however, researchers can consider evidence from new perspectives, giving the opportunity for previously obscured facets to be illuminated (p. 28).

In my construction of a research design, it was clear that different methods would reveal different “realities”. The challenge for me as I engaged in the art of hermeneutic phenomenology was to capture what I perceived to be the interesting patterns as I turned the kaleidoscope. Throughout the rest of this chapter I introduce, in brief, the research methods I used to explore the nature of transformative learning and the pedagogical approaches best suited to foster it. These methods are explored fully in ensuing chapters where their relevance and application is explained in more detail.

### **3.6.2 Learning Logs**

I was conscious throughout the research process that my research methods needed to enable me to hear my students’ perceptions of their own learning. In an attempt to accurately trace the process of transformative learning in my students, the reflections of the students themselves were of paramount importance. In the normal course of their study, students recorded reflections on their learning (and, as it transpired, on all manner of things) in journals that we called “learning logs”. In the Year 10 class that formed the basis of this study in the first year of my research, students wrote in their learning logs twice a week. The Year 11 class that formed the basis of this study in the second year of my research began by writing in their logs twice a week, at a time of their choice outside of class time. This was later reduced to once a week in order to ease the pressure on them as they faced an increasing workload. Students submitted their journals for me to

read and I wrote comments in the margins and at the end of their entries. The very act of reflective writing helped to foster transformative learning in several students. (For more on the role of critical reflection and reflective writing in the process of transformative learning, see Chapter 6). In addition, students' reflective writing also provided me with material for my research. From an ethical perspective, I made it clear to students on a number of occasions that their reflections would only be quoted if they were happy for this to be the case and if their names were changed to preserve their privacy. Interestingly, all students with whom I was involved as a teacher-researcher were happy for their reflections to be used under these circumstances.

In his review of the theoretical and empirical literature on transformative learning, Taylor (1998) points out:

Most studies were carried out in retrospect and do not clearly know the participants' original perspective prior to a transformative learning experience. Also, several studies that reported a perspective transformation among participants offered little or no data for support or clarification (p. 43).

Through students recording their thoughts about their learning on a regular basis, I was able to monitor and analyse the ways in which their perceptions may have altered over a period of time. These log entries afforded me access to students' experiences as they unfolded, rather than retrospectively. Of interest, too, were the reflections of students who revealed no obvious signs of transformation. As I pondered students' reflections and sought to respond to them (through writing in their learning logs and through the future pedagogical decisions I made) I learnt a lot about them and about my own teaching practice.

In speaking of the keeping of journals, diaries or logs, van Manen (1997) argues that "it is likely that such sources may contain reflective accounts of human experiences that are of phenomenological value" (p. 73). Indeed, the richness of my students' accounts in their learning logs never ceased to amaze me. Van Manen (1997) refers to these logs as one source of "protocol writing", which is "the generating of original texts on which the researcher can work" (p. 63). He points out that this protocol writing is not "phenomenological description", but

simply “data, or material on which to work” (p. 54). It was through using the recorded experiences gleaned from students’ learning logs (and other sources) that I was able to engage in hermeneutic phenomenological reflection. This enabled me to identify themes relevant to the nature of transformation in my students.

When I asked students to keep learning logs in the first year of my research, I was not very specific in my instructions to them. In the second year, I did, however, find it helpful to provide them with some broad guidelines designed to provide a focus for their writing (see Chapter 6). In spite of these guidelines, I found that students still digressed to discuss other issues that were important to them and I was happy that they did so. For many students, the logs became an important method of communication with me and I did not want to be the only one in a position to set the agenda.

Brookfield (1995), an advocate of reflective journal writing in the context of adult learning, gives voice to a possible danger associated with students keeping reflective journals that are read by their teacher:

Students who sense that their teacher is a strong advocate of experiential methods may pick up the implicit message that good students reveal dramatic private episodes in their lives that lead to transformative insights. Students who don’t have anything painful, traumatic, or exciting to confess may start to feel that their journal falls short. Not being able to produce revelations of sufficient intensity, they may decide to invent some, or they may start to paint quite ordinary experiences with a sheen of transformative significance (p. 13).

The danger that students’ reflective journal writing may not always be authentic is very real. Nevertheless, my experience with my students was that they used their learning logs to vent many of their heartfelt concerns, anxieties and frustrations about their learning, as well as to express their breakthroughs and feelings of excitement, relief and delight. For the most part, they did not strike me as glib accounts of what they thought I would like them to say. On the contrary, their reflections frequently jolted me into a reappraisal of my pedagogical approach to various situations. I was very conscious of the need to encourage students to



express their genuine thoughts and feelings, and I did so frequently over the period that I taught them.

### **3.6.3 Reflection Statements**

Another form of protocol writing was students' Reflection Statements. The independent learning tasks that formed an integral part of the study of English for my students proved to be significant catalysts for their transformation. At the conclusion of each major task, I asked them to write a Reflection Statement, or retrospective account of the entire process. In these statements, students frequently commented on the ways in which they perceived they had changed from the inception of the Major Work to its completion. In conjunction with the learning logs, the Reflection Statements provided useful insights into students' perceptions of their learning. Such qualitative methods have been recognised by Patrick and Middleton (2002) as appropriate in the examination of learning that is self-regulated:

Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for examining self-regulated learning as events because they involve rich, holistic descriptions, emphasize the social settings in which the phenomena are embedded, do not make assumptions about intra-individual stability, and are oriented to revealing complexity (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Denzin, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994) (p. 28).

The New South Wales Stage 6 Syllabus prescribes that students of English Extension 2 (a Higher School Certificate course requiring students to compose a substantial original composition, such as a film, suite of poems, short story, critical response etc.) must write a Reflection Statement on the process of composition and the completed product (Stage 6 Syllabus: English, 1999, p. 131). In asking my students to compose a Reflection Statement on their major self-directed learning projects in Years 10 and 11, I was both preparing them for Year 12 and encouraging them to reflect on the stages of their learning throughout the process. These Reflection Statements also provided useful insights for me in my analysis of students' development and transformation.

### **3.6.4 Peer Mentor Reviews**

Throughout the duration of students' self-directed Major Work projects they were able to call upon their peer mentor for help and support. These were reciprocal relationships, as students functioned as mentors to one another and were simultaneously mentees. (For more on peer mentor relationships see Chapter 5). For many students, the peer mentor relationship extended beyond the period of self-directed learning projects and became a means by which they achieved support at other times as well. These peer mentor relationships provided an opportunity for students to reflect on the progress made by another, as well as on their own progress. At the completion of each Major Work I asked students to write a review of their perceptions of their peer mentee's progress. What did they perceive to be the struggles and successes for their peer mentee? How were they themselves involved in the process of providing support to their peer mentee? These Peer Mentor Reviews were frequently insightful and it was helpful for me to be able to reflect upon whether there were discrepancies between a student's self-perceptions and the perceptions of their peer mentor. The Peer Mentor Reviews were sometimes strikingly candid and at other times perceptions seemed to be shrouded in vague language, reflective of a student's fear that they might offend their peer. Often, I learnt more about the student writing the review than the one about whom the review was written. In conjunction with other sources of material, the Peer Mentor Reviews provided comments that were often illuminating.

### **3.6.5 Critical and Imaginative Writing**

In Chapter 7, I explore the ways in which my own subject area, the study of literature, may be transformative for students. In order to do so, I analyse some of the critical and imaginative writing of some of my students. Quite a bit has been written about literary texts resonating with, or challenging, individuals in unique ways (Rosenblatt, 1978; Frye, 1978; Greene, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1995; Peim, 1993). Through exploring the processes involved in my students engaging with literary texts, critically writing about them, and creating their own literary texts, I

seek to illuminate some of the potential hallmarks of transformative learning and some of the pedagogical approaches that may foster it.

### **3.6.6 Focus Group Interviews**

Patrick and Middleton (2002) comment on the usefulness of interviews in qualitative research:

Open-ended interviews may complement observations because they allow respondents to reveal and explain events and experiences in their own words and from their own perspectives. Consequently, interviews enable researchers to take a grounded, inductive approach to understanding students' thoughts and behaviors, rather than only imposing their theoretical perspective or pre-established categories on what students say (p. 28).

I certainly found that the focus group interviews that I conducted with small groups of some of the students around whom I centred my explorations were enormously illuminating. I conducted these focus groups at the beginning of the third year of my research with the 21 students from my Year 12 English class, all of whom had also been in my class when they were in Year 11. (Six of these students had also been in my class in Year 10). When the interviews took place, the students and I knew each other well and the students knew each other well. I interviewed the whole class in groups of between three and six, and pragmatic considerations (such as who was free in the lunch periods or on the afternoons when the interviews were conducted) determined the composition of the groups. Whilst I asked a series of open-ended questions, students interacted with each other and I with them so that the questions, rather than always being responded to in discrete units, tended instead to form the basis for flowing discussions about the teaching and learning experienced in our classroom. I devised the questions based on my emerging observations and with my research questions, designed to explore the nature of transformative learning, firmly in mind. Van Manen (1997) issues a caution to researchers choosing to use interviews as a research method:

Too often a beginning researcher enthusiastically goes about "interviewing subjects" using the so-called "unstructured or open-ended interview method" without first carefully considering what interest the interview is to serve. One needs to guard against

the temptation to let method rule the question, rather than the research question determining what kind of method is most appropriate for its immanent direction (p. 66).

The focus questions were distributed to the students at the beginning of the interview, so students had some sort of idea of the trajectory of the interview. I refrained from giving the questions to students prior to the interview because I wanted their responses to be as spontaneous, genuine and heartfelt as possible.

The following questions formed the basis of the focus group interviews:

1. Do you think you have changed or grown as a student of English and/or as a person since the beginning of last year? If so, in what ways?
2. What is it about the way you have studied English over the past year and a bit that has changed the way you perceive yourself as a learner and/or as a person?
3. How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?
4. What words would you use to describe my style of English teaching? Can you think of any metaphors to describe me in my role as your English teacher?
5. Can you trace for me the journey of one of your self-directed learning tasks undertaken with me last year?

How did you feel at the beginning?

Did anything change as you progressed? If so, what?

What were the key moments for you?

How did you feel at the end?

How would you sum up the whole experience in terms of the impact it had on you?

The interviews were recorded on mini disc (and then transcribed) and provided very useful material, not the least because they were generated in a group context. In the excerpts from the interviews quoted throughout this thesis, the names of the students have been changed to protect their privacy. In the interviews, students questioned one another about comments that were made and agreed or disagreed with one another. Each group had its own feel or ambience. Humour and lively banter characterised two of the five focus groups. Other groups were more serious and less lively. The dynamic generated in the interviews was helpful because comments made by certain individuals sparked reactions in their peers. This obviously added a dimension that would not have been present in one-on-one interviews with students. On the other hand, it could be argued that students might have been reluctant to share some of their most vulnerable thoughts in a group context in front of their peers. Nevertheless, as was the case with their learning log reflections, I was struck by the candour of students' responses in these interviews.

My approach to Question 5 was different from my approach to the other questions. Whereas with the other questions free-flowing discussion was generated, with Question 5 I moved around the group, asking each student to respond individually. Apart from the first responder in each group, some students still alluded to comments made by others in order to establish a commonality or a difference between their experiences and the experiences of others. Nevertheless, responses to Question 5 tended to be monologues, or monologues interspersed with questions from me.

### **3.6.7 Conversations**

Cole and Knowles (2000) draw a distinction between interviews and conversations, stating that

research conversations are focused on an area of inquiry and, as information-gathering devices, are documented in some way. Perhaps, by way of contrast though, they are not staged events or formal question - answer sessions; rather, they are more like informal conversations that take place in "natural" contexts (p. 90).

In the course of my research, I had several such informal conversations with my students about their learning. Some of the most useful of these occurred when I took my students away on a camp in the first year of my research, in order that they might have uninterrupted time to work individually on their Major Works and to spend time with their peer mentors and others. As they sat under a tree working on their projects, or reflecting on the process in their learning logs, I approached some of them to chat about how they were going. I jotted down notes as I talked with them, and these notes provided very illuminating insights.

In a general sense, the dialogic nature of my approach to teaching, learning and research meant that I was constantly engaging in conversations that revealed useful insights.

### **3.6.8 Observation**

Cole and Knowles (2000) highlight the difficult nature of observation for teachers:

Teachers are typically lone adults working behind closed doors striving to meet the multiple and pressing demands of modern-day classrooms and schools. There is precious little time, opportunity, or encouragement for teachers to stop and look in a more than superficial way at what they and their students are doing and why (p. 89).

Nevertheless, in embarking on hermeneutic phenomenological research, I was aware of the importance of close observation as a research method. The very fact that I was engaged in research meant that I was focused upon closely observing and reflecting upon the learning of my students and my own teaching practice. This was particularly important when I was seeking to establish the emotional responses of students to a range of learning tasks. In Chapter 8, in particular, I incorporate analysis of my observations of students' emotions and behaviour as they engaged in self-directed learning tasks. Van Manen (1997) states:

Close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to

situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations. It is similar to the attitude of the author who is always on the look-out for stories to tell, incidents to remember. The method of close observation requires that one be a participant and an observer at the same time, that one maintain a certain orientation of reflectivity while guarding against the more manipulative and artificial attitude that a reflective attitude tends to insert in a social situation and relation (p. 69).

This “orientation of reflectivity” led me to engage in reflective and analytical writing upon my observations. This writing formed the basis of drafts and re-drafts of sections of the chapters of this thesis and proved useful in crystallising my perceptions of the learning process for my students.

### **3.7 Articulations of Life Works in Progress**

As I engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology in my pedagogical context, a realisation dawned on me: that the very methodology that undergirded my research was the methodology (or study of the way) of learning that I had been encouraging my students to develop. In encouraging them to describe and reflect upon their learning through writing about it, I had been encouraging them to engage in a phenomenological process. In identifying themes within their own learning, especially in their reflective learning logs and Reflection Statements, they had been engaging in an interpretive, or hermeneutic process. These dimensions were commensurate with my desire to foster in my students learning that would be transformative. The obvious corollary of all this is that this research methodology fostered my own transformative learning and, in turn, my experiences of transformation had a profound bearing on my teaching.

Cole and Knowles (2000) highlight the importance of teachers engaging in autobiographical inquiry as they seek to inquire into the practices and attitudes that will most benefit their students:

To be a teacher is to commit to ongoing autobiographical acts (which are viewed and experienced by others). Teaching acts represent articulations of a life work in progress. Strung together, like beads on a string, the day-to-day teaching events become

episodic evidence of changing perspectives and a growing life in relation to society and the world at large. To teach is to be involved in lifelong reflective inquiry (p. 22).



## Chapter 4

### The Transformative Power of Dialogism in Teaching, Learning and Research

*There is no pleasure to me without communication: there is not so much as a sprightly thought comes into my mind that it does not grieve me to have produced it alone, and that I have no one to tell it to.*

*Michel de Montaigne*

#### 4.1 Dialogism

In his fascinating article entitled “The Epic and the Novel: Dialogism and Teacher Research”, Coulter (1999) uses Bakhtin’s writings as the basis for his argument for “dialogic research” (p. 5). His argument is founded on Bakhtin’s “notion of heteroglossia” that “goes beyond a plurality of viewpoints to the very structure of language; it is impossible to speak, to understand the world, without using the languages of others” (Coulter, 1999, p. 6).

As a teacher-researcher I, too, became aware of the need for a dialogic approach. In my context, this meant that the very process of discovery, the hermeneutics of research, involved a special dynamic between me – in my capacity as simultaneously both teacher and researcher – and my students. Coulter (1999) draws attention to the fact that

Bakhtin uses the concept of polyphony, which embodies a dialogic sense of truth and includes a special position for the author. Truth, for Bakhtin, emerges from a genuine communication between people; it is not imposed by one partner on the other (Bakhtin, 1963/1984a, p. 110). (p. 7).

In my exploration of the nature of transformative learning in my high school English students, a monologic approach to research, that preferenced my voice over students’ voices, and my interpretation of events over theirs, would have been distortive. In fact, it is the interplay between students’ voices and my own – the interpersonal polyphony – that lies at the centre of my pedagogical approach and that informed my research methodology. I would argue that it is this

dialogism that both forms the basis of a learning environment designed to foster transformation, and that has enabled me to write about the phenomenon of transformation (for me and my students) through a “mutual construction of truth” (Coulter, 1999, p. 7).

## 4.2 Unfolding Narratives

In this quest for meaning, I have come to realise that there needs to be a willingness to tolerate, and even celebrate, ambiguity. There needs to be a recognition that meaning is created in what Rasberry (2001) calls “the tangle” (p. 133). One of these tangles for the teacher-researcher is well expressed by Rasberry (2001):

How do we talk about teaching and learning in our roles as researchers whose very act(ion)s, in a contradictory sense, threaten to foreclose on an ongoing conversation by our insistence on speaking? How do we research the classroom when it is always itself, restless, forever altering its color like a sad eye? (pp. 131-132).

I think the answer to these questions lies in celebrating the tangles we confront, and in giving expression to them, without necessarily feeling the need to unravel them. The metaphor of “an unfolding narrative” (Davies and Harre, 1990, p. 53) resonates with my conception of pedagogical experience. This unfolding narrative is one

in which we are constituted in one position or another within the course of one story, or even come to stand in multiple or contradictory positions, or to negotiate a new position by ‘refusing’ the position that the opening rounds of a conversation have made available to us (Davies and Harre, 1990, p. 53).

The challenge for me as a teacher-researcher was to acknowledge the complexity of my students as individuals, of their relationships with one another, and of the dynamic between them and me.

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive

practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives (Davies and Harre, 1990, p. 46).

Mezirow (2000) expresses this relational view of identity in this way: "Our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. Human reality is intersubjective; our life histories and language are bound up with those of others" (p. 27).

### **4.3 Dialogic Research**

In Coulter's (1999) collaborative study of the retention of students in grade, he chose to supplant a monologic approach to the interpretation of data with an approach that involved "finding the voices silenced or marginalized by monologic practices" (p. 9). In doing so, he was recognising central voices that are often viewed as peripheral in educational research: "Alongside the third person, objective prose of standard research reports are the stories of the informants in their own language, using their voices" (Coulter, 1999, p. 10). Here Coulter draws on Bakhtin's conception of what the novel (as opposed to the epic) has to offer. In Bakhtin's view, the construction of the novel bears testimony to "the forces of counter-culture, opposition to hierarchy and centralization: a folk-festive culture best exemplified in medieval carnival and found in the novels of Rabelais" (Coulter, 1999, p. 9).

Of course, for the high school English students involved in my research, learning took place within a school environment founded on timetables, structures and clearly delineated hierarchies. In this context, their voices were often deemed irrelevant in the inexorable drive towards meeting syllabus outcomes and fulfilling examination criteria. Therefore, I felt the challenge for me, in my capacity as teacher and researcher, was to reveal my eagerness to hear and respond to their voices through engaging in respectful, empathic and meaningful dialogue with them. Coulter (1999), drawing on Bakhtin, puts it this way:

“Carnival involves discovering the centrifugal in the centripetal, the novel within the epic” (p. 9).

A postmodernist view of research shifts the emphasis away from ideology – which “silences and disempowers individuals so that the powerful may govern” (Tierney, 1993, p. 129) – towards an emphasis upon the value of dialogue:

Rather than researcher-researched relationships where one individual is powerful because of the knowledge he/she holds and the other is powerless because of a lack thereof, individuals become engaged in modes of dialogue where all individuals are collaborators and participants (Tierney, 1993, p. 128).

My attempt to capture the authentic voices of my students led me to listen to them in a variety of contexts and in a variety of ways. This included listening to their stories in class, in conversational interviews, and expressed in written form in their reflective journals (or what we referred to as learning logs). Nevertheless, although I was keen to hear my students and to be faithful to their voices, I was also mindful of the important role of the researcher in what van Manen (1997) describes as “mining meaning” from the experiential accounts of others (p. 86). So I have sought to hear students’ voices clearly, in order to be able to apply myself to the complexities of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection.

In presenting and exploring stories recalled by retired teachers, Ben-Peretz (1995) highlights the value of personal narratives in unearthing significant pedagogical realities. It is exciting to read the personal reflections of the retired teachers in Ben-Peretz’s (1995) work. It is also a sad reality that for many teachers, deep and prolonged reflection on their teaching practice does not occur until retirement. There are many valid reasons for this, not the least of these being the taxing workload experienced by teachers today. Much can be learned from retired teachers’ stories, but it is unfortunate that, by definition, their discoveries cannot impact on their teaching practice. The benefit of reflection upon personal narratives (one’s own and one’s students) whilst being a practicing teacher is that ideas that emerge can serve as a catalyst to transform pedagogical practice.

## 4.4 Reflective Discourse and the Dialogic Classroom

One of the central dimensions of Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theory of transformation is the importance of discourse. Mezirow (2000) argues that transformative learning "involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons" for our assumptions (p. 8). In the domain of learning described as communicative learning (Habermas, 1984) "we must become critically reflective of the *assumptions* of the person communicating" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 9). In the process of transformative learning, reflective discourse is used to help individuals to question the ways in which their currently held frames of reference may not be the most valid for them. Effective discourse of this kind will involve what Rothman (1996) terms an "intersubjective resonance" that is based on "empowerment and self-determination of the participants, a participant-based agenda, validation of emotions as a part of the process, and a recognition that confusion is invariably involved and legitimate" (p. 351). Daloz (2000) points out that this type of dialogue needs to occur in

a climate of safety in which people feel free to speak their truth, where blaming and judging are minimal, where full participation is encouraged, where a premium is placed on mutual understanding, but also where evidence and arguments may be assessed objectively and assumptions surfaced openly (p. 114).

In this chapter, I wish to explore the view that this type of reflective discourse often emerges within dialogic learning contexts, and will do so frequently if the educator is committed to transformative pedagogy. The notion of learning contexts being based on dialogue is not new. For example, in three separate papers, Barnes, Britton and Torbe (1986) highlight the fact that effective learning is ideally fostered in dialogic learning contexts. Interestingly, Britton's paper, entitled 'Talking to Learn', also highlights the fact that dialogue provides *evidence* of learning. He states that learning cannot be "marshalled and docketed like the exhibits in a museum. Glimpses of it are to be found, first, in what people say to each other" (Barnes, Britton and Torbe, 1986, pp. 92-93).

In spite of the fact that research points to the value of learning through dialogue, in practice, a dialogic approach to pedagogy is not always the preferred model. If

engagement in this kind of dialogue is to become a familiar practice, it makes sense that it should be encouraged in a high school setting. The high school English classroom is an ideal place to encourage students to question why they hold certain views about literature, their world and themselves. As they do so, they may grow in their capacity to acknowledge their need to revise their frames of reference when they decide that this is necessary. In a dialogic classroom, where all voices are valued as the means by which mutual learning occurs, reflective discourse emerges as a powerful tool for the reassessment of assumptions. This happens as the teacher models the type of questioning that triggers reflective discourse.

Tannen's (1999) view of our culture as an "argument culture" highlights the need for teachers and students interested in transformative learning to view discourse in an alternative light, for as Tannen (1999) states:

If you limit your view of a problem to choosing between two sides, you inevitably reject much that is true, and you narrow your field of vision to the limits of those two sides, making it unlikely you'll pull back, widen your field of vision, and discover the paradigm shift that will permit truly new understanding (p. 297).

Belenky and Stanton (2000) discuss the need for connected knowing when engaging in dialogue. They describe this as "the believing game", because people who play it look "for strengths, not weaknesses, in another's argument. If a weakness is perceived they struggle to understand why someone might think that way" (p. 87). Belenky and Stanton (2000) argue that critical discourse is, by contrast, a "doubting game" that "can only be played well on a level playing field" (p. 89). Given that in most classroom situations (both in high schools and adult learning contexts) the playing fields are rarely, if ever, universally level, it would seem good practice to foster connected knowing.

Belenky et al. (1986) use the image of the midwife-teacher to describe the type of facilitation required by the educator if authentic, potentially transformative, dialogue is to be experienced by learners:

Midwife-teachers do not administer anesthesia. They support their students' thinking, but they do not do the students' thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do....The midwife-teacher's first concern is to preserve the student's fragile thoughts, to see that they are born with their truth intact, that they do not turn into acceptable lies....The cycle is one of confirmation-evocation-confirmation. Midwife-teachers help students to deliver their words to the world, and they use their knowledge to put the students into conversation with other voices – past and present – in the culture (pp. 217-219).

This image of the midwife-teacher is helpful because whilst acknowledging the importance of drawing out students' voices, it also recognises the need for the expertise of the teacher in this process. Teachers, by virtue of their role, have a form of power: the power to impose their own voice, or to draw out the voices of the learners under their care. As Brookfield (2000) states:

No matter how much we protest our desire to be at one with learners there is often a predictable flow of attention focused on us. Although it is important to privilege learners' voices and to create multiple foci of attention in the classroom, it is disingenuous to pretend that as educators we are the same as students (p. 137).

In focus group interviews my students commented on what they perceived to be the dialogic nature of our shared English classroom. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I analyse and interpret in some detail the comments made by my students about the nature of our English classroom. Through unearthing some of the significant realities of their lived experience in this context, I seek to highlight the important role a dialogic classroom may play in fostering transformative learning.

#### **4.5 Descriptions of a Dialogic Classroom**

I conducted focus group interviews with my Year 12 students in order to discover more fully their views on their experiences of learning English with me. Most students based their responses on their experience of Year 11 English, as the interviews took place near the beginning of their Year 12 English course. Some of the most interesting comments came from the six students who had also been in my class when they were in Year 10. I gave students all five focus group

questions shortly before the interview began. The following excerpts from focus group interviews are taken from students' responses to Questions 3 and 4:

3. How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

4. What words would you use to describe my style of English teaching? Can you think of any metaphors to describe me in my role as your English teacher?

Responses to Questions 3 and 4 tended to merge. In essence, many of the comments highlight the dialogic nature of the classroom in which these students studied English, whereby multiple voices were given value.

### Excerpt 1

**Me:** How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

**Adam:** It's very open. I can throw an idea around the room and it just bounces and bounces and bounces. It helps to have that kind of freedom in the classroom.

**Judy:** There's a lot of independent viewpoints.

**Paul:** I picture it as parliament with all the politicians sitting around a table. Views are debated and eventually everyone forms their own view.

**Sandra:** I sometimes enjoy just sitting back and listening and you realise how much you hadn't thought of those viewpoints. It's so useful to your own knowledge.

**Adam:** It's egalitarian. Everyone gets a go.

**Paul:** You could wander off yourself and not pay much attention, if you wanted.

**Me:** What words would you use to describe my style of English teaching?

**Sandra:** You [referring to me] know how to bring about the discussion and how to direct it. You encourage other people in the classroom to give their viewpoint and you'll say, "How do you feel about that? Do you agree with that comment?" and that sort of thing (Focus Group Interview: 5.2.02).



## Excerpt 2

**Me:** How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

**Tanya:** Quite like, open. Discussion-based.

**Me:** OK, that's good. Open, discussion-based.

**Jane:** I think it's really good like that.

**Elizabeth:** Because we get lots of perspectives on things. Not just the teacher's.

**Jane:** I mean we have such different people in our class, like, you've got, you know, from one end of the spectrum to the other.... I think it's good because you've got so many different people with different ideas and who have like talents, specific talents in different areas.... And so when you're discussing and stuff, if Anthony says something really intelligent...like we write it down, like and I think that's good that we're able to. I don't think anyone's too scared to speak either.

**David:** But you don't feel like you have to speak.

[Later]

**Naomi:** Cause you're more like a facilitator...than a teacher in the sense that you, you don't necessarily teach everything to us. Like I think everyone teaches everyone else. So you stand there and you start it and you like get everyone rolling and give us the main basis for it and then everyone sort of teaches everyone else in the sense that we can all learn something from everyone else.

**David:** But you steer us in the right direction. You manage the egos, too. You're the facilitator and we feed off each other.

**Jane:** You can't switch off.

**Tanya:** You can get out of it what you want to get out of it. You can go in there and if you want to contribute and all the rest and make notes...like you can get a lot out of it.

**Naomi:** And therefore if you lapse for a minute you can miss heaps.

**Tanya:** Yeah, exactly.

[Later]

**Me:** So it's more intense than some other classes?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, definitely.

**Tanya:** Yeah, you have to focus.

**Jane:** But without being too stressful. It's not like focusing through an hour of Maths. It's a completely different environment. I actually look forward to it. It's a break from sitting there copying down notes from the board. It's a better thing to be able to come in and sit there and talk.

**Me:** But do you still think it's productive, even though it's discussion-based?

**Naomi:** I reckon the discussion is more productive...

[Later]

**Elizabeth:** You can't drift off when it's discussion-based because the focus isn't just on the board....The focus is just everywhere and it's on you, it's on everyone (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

### Excerpt 3

**Me:** How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

**Kathleen:** I draw a lot of parallels with U.N. conventions and stuff where a big variety of people get together and there's one person, a chairperson, who tries to keep us on track and everything and addresses the main issues but pretty much leaves it up to discussion amongst ourselves...and if we go off track, you'll bring us back on, but you let us see where the conversation takes us. There's no other class like it, that's for sure.

**Anthony:** There's a lot more definite structure in other lessons. For example, with my old Physics teacher, if you missed lesson 14, you could get a print-off of lesson 14 when you came back. With all the boxes filled in. That's a different approach to things.

**Kathleen:** With other subjects, the teachers say, "This is what you need to learn. This is what you need to remember. This is how you should set it out."

**Me:** What are the implications of my approach, where you are not able to pick up a print-off of lesson 14?

**Anthony:** I need to be a more proactive thinker in our English class..

**Kathleen:** I think proactive thinking is going to be almost always more beneficial to the student because if you're just given the notes, it's not really you thinking, it's you regurgitating what you've been told (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

The above excerpts taken from three of the five focus group interviews are illuminating, partly because an emergent common view of the nature of the English classroom we shared and of my pedagogical style can be identified. Indeed, I have grouped these segments together in order to highlight this common view. (The excerpts that follow later in this chapter will expose other more confronting dimensions of our classroom dynamics). This view is expressed in different ways by different students, but it amounts to a perception that our classroom was dialogic, not monologic, and that this was a vital dynamic that propelled the learning that took place in the classroom. Perhaps this very sense of identity – of what our classroom was like – was itself significant in the process of transformation for some of these students. In critically reflecting upon what our classroom was like, students were equally aware of what it was *not* like. And so the very emergence of a common understanding of what “to learn” meant within the bounds of *our* classroom, as distinct from what it meant in other classrooms, was important. Greene (1978) emphasises, in general terms, that this common awareness of a group identity is the first step towards potential transformation of oppressive circumstances that can swamp students and educators alike:

Like Merleau-Ponty, I would lay stress upon talking together, upon the mutual exchange that expresses lives actually lived together, that forges commonalities. I would work for the kind of critical reflection that can be carried on by persons who are situated in the concreteness of the world, by persons equipped for interrogation, for problematization, and for hermeneutic interpretation of the culture – of the present and the past (pp. 107-108).

Greene (1978) goes on to stress “the need for educators to work with their students for the kinds of synthesis and awarenesses that open the way, the *praxis*, as those students explore the common condition and work to transform what is given to them as inexorable” (pp. 108-109). The focus group interviews gave

voice to a common awareness of what our English classroom was like. It was not that all students agreed on the implications of the nature of our classroom, or that all described it in the same way, or with the same emphases, but the essence of what all students had to say was, in effect, that we shared a dialogic classroom.

Essentially, students identified that the learning environment was characterised by multiple voices being given value and weight. (“There’s a lot of independent viewpoints.”; “It’s egalitarian. Everyone gets a go.”; “we get lots of perspectives on things, not just the teacher’s”; “I think it’s good because you’ve got so many different people with different ideas and who have like talents, specific talents in different areas....”; “Like I think everyone teaches everyone else.”). But more than the existence of many independent voices, students drew attention to the interplay of these voices. (“I can throw an idea around the room and it just bounces and bounces and bounces.”; “I picture it as parliament... Views are debated...”; “I sometimes enjoy just sitting back and listening and you realise how much you hadn’t thought of those viewpoints.”; “I draw a lot of parallels with U.N. conventions and stuff where a big variety of people get together and there’s... discussion amongst ourselves...”; “The focus is just everywhere and it’s on you, it’s on everyone.”). Adam’s metaphor in Excerpt 1 of an idea “bouncing” like a ball, as if the initial impetus of the idea is transmuted according to what it hits along the way, highlights the dialogic nature of learning in the classroom. An idea may begin with an individual, but it is developed and crystallised, not in isolation, but through interaction with others. The ball metaphor is apt in more ways than one, because the image captures the dynamism of an active sport, not a passive process – indeed, it is *inter-action* (not passivity) that is the key here. It is interesting, too, that when students refer to the *inter-play* (with all the connotations of freedom, spontaneity and fun that this word implies) of ideas, they tend to use images to describe what they mean. The images of parliament and U.N. conventions highlight not only the variety of views expressed in the classroom, but also the engagement of speakers with one another, to the extent that their ideas generate a life of their own. In Excerpt 3, Roger refers to this as “discussion amongst ourselves...where the conversation takes us”.

The nature of a dialogic classroom is also that the focus is on all participants, not on a single authority figure. In this context, Brookfield (1990) makes an interesting point:

The idea of multiplistic interpretations, of exploring the same issue from a variety of perspectives, is resisted strongly by those students who wish to view the discussion leader as the ultimate source of authority, the fount of intellectual wisdom (p. 111).

It seems clear that my students, irrespective of whether or not they would have *liked* me to have been “the ultimate source of authority”, were aware that learning through engaging with “multiplistic interpretations” was in fact the way our classroom functioned. As Elizabeth states in Excerpt 2: “The focus is just everywhere and it’s on you, it’s on everyone”. Elizabeth’s comment here reflects her awareness that learning in our classroom took place as all individuals functioned as a community of learners.

There is a receptive dimension to all of this, too. Sandra comments on “just sitting back and listening” to the ideas of others. A dialogic classroom is, of course, comprised of active listeners, as well as speakers. It is true that the focus is “on everyone”, as Elizabeth put it, but the level of engagement in the interplay of ideas is still up to the individual. In the dialogic classroom, passivity and even “switching off” is always an option for students, but it is not an option for those who want to learn, not least because there is no fall back position. If missed, the dynamic interaction that constitutes the learning process cannot be recaptured. As Naomi says in Excerpt 2, “if you lapse for a minute you can miss heaps”.

Anthony presents the view that there is “a lot more definite structure in other lessons”. There is a sense in which students perceived that the lived experience of the classroom dynamic *was* the learning process. As such, they recognised that it would have been impossible for me as the teacher to provide them, should they request it, with a “print-off of lesson 14 with all the boxes filled in”. Discussion was not an exercise designed to make them feel good about themselves before the *real* learning, espoused by me as the teacher, took place. The dynamic between

students and between them and me formed the very *essence* of the learning experience. Brookfield (1990) puts it this way:

If participants feel that their contributions are merely rehearsals, courteously observed formalities, before the leader lays down the truth in the form of a closing summary, then they will never participate in discussion with any genuine sense of honest searching or conviction (p. 111).

## 4.6 The Confronting Nature of the Dialogic Classroom

Van Manen (1997) states:

The meaning or essence of a phenomenon is never simple or one-dimensional. Meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered. That is why the meaning of pedagogy can never be grasped in a single definition (p. 78).

The nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy is indeed “multi-dimensional” and even the multiple dimensions themselves have dimensions within them. To say that learning that is potentially transformative is dialogic is to open up a myriad of meanings associated with dialogic learning. Excerpts 4 and 5, also taken from focus group interviews, add depth and new dimensions to the nature of dialogic learning explored through Excerpts 1 to 3 above. In Excerpts 4 and 5, students from two of the focus groups reveal that dialogic learning has various implications and that for some students it can, at times, be overwhelmingly confronting.

### Excerpt 4

**Me:** How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

**Jane:** To be completely honest with you, when I first came in [to our class], I just thought, oh no, this is so bad. I honestly just wanted to get out of there...

**Me:** Because?

**Jane:** It was confronting. Like it was.

**Tanya:** I reckon it's really supportive, actually.

**Jane:** I felt initially like I was in the wrong place.

**Me:** Jane, can you elaborate on that a little bit?

**Jane:** I just felt it was like, way out of my league. Do you know what I mean? I just felt like everyone was too smart for me being in the same class as me and everyone came up with this intelligent stuff and I'd (pause)

**Me:** And because the class was discussion-based, this was more obviously manifested?

**Jane:** Yeah.

[Later]

**Tanya:** We get pushed pretty hard. And I think we push ourselves pretty hard. There are very few bludge periods in English (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

### Excerpt 5

**Me:** How would you describe our English classroom? Can you think of any metaphors to describe it?

**Alan:** Um, personally I find it really quite pressured in there in the sense that there is a really, really high standard and you don't want to slip behind because you can feel that there's [pause] the atmosphere is very encouraging but it also has a – it's really quite competitive. It's, I'd hesitate to use elitist, but it's a very high quality class.

**Me:** Is this, the two words you used there, one was "competition" and one was "elitist". How do those qualities manifest themselves? Is this to do with how I am, or is this to do with the peer dynamic?

**Alan:** It's to do with the peer dynamic. The whole group is full of, for the most part, really ambitious people, really extroverted people, who are more than happy to put up their hand and say their point of view and equally are more than happy to put up their hand and shoot another person down. So you really want to get in there and have your say, but at the same time, there's always in the back of your mind, you know, the sense of "Should I say this?". You know, "What are the consequences of that going to be?"

**Me:** So you don't think that the peers in the classroom are necessarily supportive of one another?

**Alan:** Yes, within your own sort of groups, but there are a lot of groups in our classroom.

**Penny:** It's just a highly intelligent class and everybody is vying to do better than the other people, because everybody knows how intelligent everybody else is in there and they feel that their place in the class is something that really has to be held on to and, kind of, you have to try really, really hard to keep up with everyone else.

**Me:** Do you agree with that, Colin?

**Colin:** Well, yeah, not really naming names or anything, but when we were in our old room, the U-shape, there were very, very different attitudes on each side.

**Alan:** Yeah, each side had a different stance on things.

**Colin:** Yeah, and I'm sure you've noticed times in class when people have openly shot other people down.

**Joshua:** I don't feel like I'm feeling this as much as the other three.

**Me:** Could you tell us a little bit about what you are feeling, Joshua? I mean, it'd be nice to see if there are some other perspectives on this.

**Joshua:** I can see what they mean. I mean, it is an achievement when you contribute something without getting shot down, but I'm not sort of as – I don't feel the competitiveness as much.

**Alan:** But that's you, though.

**Penny:** It depends on how secure you are, as well. As soon as you think, I don't get this as much as someone else, you see everybody else doing really well –

**Me:** What I find interesting as your teacher hearing you say that is that my observation out the front, far from a sort of competitive edge, is more that a lot of you are very laid back and hardly care – like you're expressing a view, but giving the impression of “Oh well, whatever....”.

**Alan:** Appearances can be very deceptive.

**Joshua:** To really win you have to do it easily.



**Me** [laughing]: OK, so it's not cool to look like you're trying hard.

**Alan** [laughing]: You can't look like you're trying. You've got to throw away a one-liner.

**Colin**: But, even after all that, I think the class, it's a good class to have.

**Alan**: Yeah, while it is really competitive, it does create a really good atmosphere for discussion and you get a lot out of it.

**Joshua**: I went through a dip in English in Middle School, so I've always thought – and I'm the only one in the class not doing any Extensions [additional English courses] – so I feel like I don't, like, need to do as well as everyone else.

**Colin**: I'm not so much afraid, more wary of the responses from other people, but in the same way, I really appreciate, like studying poetry, because that's not my strong point, I really appreciate everyone else's comments, not just yours, because that helps me understand it more.

**Me**: Is there a stimulating dimension to the fact that there is this kind of banter?

**Alan**: Oh definitely, because you always want to have your say and add your little piece.

**Penny**: It does keep the standard really high.

**Alan**: It keeps the atmosphere really charged. It does provide that extra spark which can be really good.

**Penny**: It just depends how you respond to that kind of atmosphere.

**Me**: What words would you use to describe my style of English teaching? Can you think of any metaphors to describe me in my role as your English teacher?

**Alan**: Quite free-flowing. You like discussions, um, to get things going in a class situation, rather than quiet, sit down, take notes. Um...

**Penny**: At the same time, it's kind of a very, um, intense form of teaching. Like you come into the lesson and sit down and from then on you're concentrating and you're thinking about what you can say and how you're going to respond and you're listening the whole time. It's much more serious.

**Colin:** But there are laughs, too.

**Penny:** Oh yeah, not serious in a bad way. I mean that other classes, you know, are a bludge, but you just know that 2 Unit English isn't easy. You just have to concentrate.

**Joshua:** I think it's a good balance of using a variety of ways of learning – both independent and some non-independent – and discussions and things like that – and not completely driven by the teacher whilst still staying on focus and on topic, which is really good. Often teachers that are more, you know, into discussion and more into open learning and not as much into notes or things like that, can wander off and it falls apart sometimes, which it doesn't in English.

**Penny:** We are always on the topic, I think.

**Colin:** We generally tend to cover a very large range of views. As Penny said, you know you're going to English and you're going to have to concentrate for an hour.

**Alan:** It can also be helpful when, um, you [referring to me] generally – and I think I'm fine in saying this – you don't hesitate to express your own opinion on something that we're looking at. If someone puts up their hand, you won't just take what they say at face value. You will think about it and respond to it accordingly. And if you think it's a good point, then you'll think about it and elaborate on it, and if you think it's not, then you'll happily tell them that.

**Penny:** You have to appreciate that, though, because it's really irritating if everybody says something and you're just sitting there agreeing with everything, like Mr X who we had when you were away agreed with everything we said.

**Me:** OK, so words that you've used include things like “free-flowing”, um, promoting discussion, ah, a balance between perhaps guidance and structure and allowing you to pursue your own ideas.

**Joshua:** Also, you direct pretty balanced discussions.

**Me:** OK, good, thank you for that (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

In these two excerpts, students' comments reveal that dialogic learning can be daunting. In Excerpt 4, for example, Jane says that her initial desire upon joining our class was to “get out of there” because it was “confronting” and she goes on

to say that she felt like she was “in the wrong place”. She says she felt “way out of [her] league”. Jane goes on to say, “I just felt like everyone was too smart”. This notion of the dialogic classroom being “confronting” seems to be connected with what Alan, in Excerpt 5, terms the “competitive” nature of the class. Now to some extent, this may well be a product of the fact that the students involved in these focus group interviews were in the top class in their year and, as such, many were competing for the top positions. As Penny states in Excerpt 5, “...everybody is vying to do better than others, because everybody knows how intelligent everybody else is in there and they feel that their place in the class is something that really has to be held on to....” Nevertheless, it appears there is more to it than that. It is true that, as Adam states in Excerpt 1, our classroom was “egalitarian”; if what is meant by that word is that everyone had the opportunity to be heard and to contribute to the learning process. But group dynamics have a life of their own and, as is evident in the excerpts above, in a classroom situation there will inevitably be undercurrents that are not recognised by the teacher, and yet that have a very real impact on the learning process.

Providing the opportunity for many voices to be heard does not guarantee that all voices will be treated with equal respect. Indeed, it does not guarantee that some ideas will not be openly derided. As Colin said to me in Excerpt 5, “I’m sure you’ve noticed times in class when people have openly shot down other people”. I would argue that this in itself is part of the learning process in a dialogic classroom. My own experience is that in grappling with and responding to the ideas of others, perhaps in an attempt to promote my own, my views are shaped and re-shaped in ways I could never have predicted. Of course, this kind of classroom requires some management from the teacher. As David said in Excerpt 2, “You steer us in the right direction. You manage the egos, too. You’re the facilitator and we feed off each other”. Managing egos is an integral part of dialogic pedagogy, but it is different from controlling or dominating egos. And sometimes, the force of those egos, in spite of that management, will be so great that students will never adjust to what they perceive to be a confronting environment. That is why a dialogic approach to pedagogy needs to be complemented by empathic relationships and learning contexts.

Sometimes feeling comfortable in a classroom that is characterised by dialogic learning, with all the feisty and unpredictable interactions that that implies, simply takes time. Jane, for example, whose initial reaction was to get out of the class because it was confronting, ended up adjusting well, to the extent that she became one of the most active participants in the class. She also happened to thrive, in terms of her academic achievements, in this environment. By contrast, Belinda left the class about half-way through the year because she felt it was too confronting. I asked Belinda to reflect upon her thoughts and feelings associated with wanting to leave the class by writing in her learning log. She wrote:

I'm not particularly good at working in an environment where everyone is a lot smarter than I am. I'm used to being in the mid range and so I am really uncomfortable with this new surrounding. I'm friends with the majority of people in the class and don't find them intimidating at all out of class, but I feel really intimidated by them all in English. That sounds really weird as I get along with everyone really well. This is so hard to explain. It's not that I'm dumb or anything it's just that everyone is a lot smarter than I am and I find that really puts me off. Everything I do or say, I feel isn't up to the same standard as everyone else in the class and that they're all thinking, "God Belinda's dumb." Everyone has always seen me as a dumb blonde and that's fine out of class, it's just that everyone seems to still see me as this dumb blonde in class. That's why I prefer being in the mid range, as that way I prove everyone wrong. I hope this is not too confusing. So basically the reason why I want to leave is because I feel intimidated and not as smart as everyone else, and feel that I could probably do better in another class where I don't have this problem. I know all of this is probably just in my head but it's really bothering me. I also know that staying in the class would probably help me in the long run as I'm being pushed to my full potential in order to keep up with the class. But I don't really think my full potential is good enough for this class (Learning Log: 30.7.01).

As I read this entry of Belinda's I was moved by her candour and by the depth of her feelings. The entry triggered some soul-searching within me. I wondered whether if I had managed things differently I may have prevented Belinda from reaching this point. It is clear from this entry that Belinda found the nature of the dialogic classroom intimidating. Her self-concept and her perception of what others thought of her played a part in her response to classroom dynamics. This can be seen when she remarks that "everyone is a lot smarter than I am" and,

“Everyone has always seen me as a dumb blonde.” I did not observe any instance when Belinda was in any way put down by others in the class or treated as a “dumb blonde”. Whilst she was not at the top of the class, everyone was *not* smarter than her, either. Nevertheless, what matters is Belinda’s perception that this was the case. Interestingly, in reflecting upon the situation herself, Belinda says, “I know all this is probably just in my head.” Yet she also comments on the fact that she did not feel intimidated by her peers in all contexts – “I’m friends with the majority of people in the class and don’t find them intimidating at all out of class, but I feel really intimidated by them all in English.” Belinda’s comment here indicates that learning that is essentially dialogic can expose a student’s insecurities through comparison with others. It is impossible to hide in this type of classroom. Even silence is a statement of sorts that may be judged by others in a variety of ways.

In most instances, students in my classes, including this class of which Belinda was a part, pushed through initial feelings of intimidation, or of being overwhelmed, to a place where the engagement with others was enriching and, in some instances, transforming. In Belinda’s case, her insecurities engendered what I would call a sense of hopelessness that gripped her to the point that it was “really bothering” her. By hopelessness I mean that, at a deep level, she believed that her perceived reality would never alter, even though on the surface she acknowledged that “staying in the class would probably help [her] in the long run.” The role of emotions in the learning process is crucial and, in Belinda’s case, any *rational* inklings of long term gain were subsumed by her pressing need to escape *feelings* of inadequacy and self-doubt. Belinda was not optimistic about the fact that the future could be a transformation of the present. Instead, her view of the *now* so dominated her thinking and feeling that she could not find the courage to face the potential hazards of dialogic learning. And there *are* potential hazards. People can be envious, small-minded, ungenerous, mean-spirited, caustic, scornful and scathing. Learning through engagement with others therefore has the potential to threaten one’s sense of self. People also can be sensitive, insecure and fragile and so even the *fear* that people may not be supportive is sufficient to threaten one’s sense of self.

Joshua provides an interesting counterbalance to Belinda's response in that although he was achieving similar results to Belinda, his expectations of himself were more relaxed. In Excerpt 5 he said, "I feel like I don't, like, need to do as well as everyone else." He attributes this to the fact that he was doing better in English in this class than he had in previous years and to the fact that he had not undertaken additional Extension English courses, and so did not feel the need to be considered a top English student. In response to Joshua's comment, "I don't feel the competitiveness as much," Alan responds, "But that's you, though." (Excerpt 5). Here Alan hits on the fact that an individual's personality can impact upon their perceptions of their ability, and even significance, in comparison with others in a group. It was just not in Joshua's personality to compare himself with others to the extent that he may feel bothered by his relative ability. It *was* in Belinda's personality to do so. In Penny's words in Excerpt 5, it "depends on how secure you are, as well." Dialogic learning can expose people's insecurities, because it is difficult to remain anonymous in a dialogic classroom.

From talking with Belinda about her feelings and her desire to move out of our top class into one of the mixed ability classes, I learnt a lot about the nature of transformative learning. Transformation requires a willingness to tolerate the disequilibrium that is sometimes associated with being pushed out of one's comfort zone. It involves a willingness to be confronted by alternative perspectives, even when these may threaten one's personal sense of security. It also requires an openness to external forces that may trigger critical self-reflection to the point where ideas and attitudes about the self may be transformed. I learnt from Belinda that there are times in people's lives (perhaps connected to their developmental readiness, their current circumstances, or the combination of personalities with whom they find themselves in a learning context) when the possibility of engaging in the type of learning that is potentially transformative simply may be too confronting. Bettelheim (1979) puts it this way:

To find deeper meaning, one must become able to transcend narrow confines of a self-centered existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life – if not right now, then at some future time. This feeling is necessary if a person is to be satisfied with himself and with what he is doing.... Our positive feelings give us the strength to develop our rationality; only hope

for the future can sustain us in the adversities we unavoidably encounter (pp. 3-4).

I take Bettelheim's use of the word "self-centered" here not to mean selfish, in the commonly pejorative sense in which it is used, but to mean so resolutely believing in a current, perhaps restrictive view of self, that hope of that self being transformed does not exist. At the time that she was in my class, I suspect that Belinda did not, in Bettelheim's words, have the positive feelings to give her the strength to develop her rationality and so the adversities she perceived annihilated hope for the future. I would add to Bettelheim's analysis that it is not just rationality that needs developing, but also emotional resilience, and of course here is the conundrum: in order to develop emotional resilience, students need to experience positive feelings and to persevere in the face of negative feelings. This is why an educator's empathic responses – of encouragement, affirmation and support – to students' emotional fragility is so important. A dialogic classroom may be confronting for students and teachers alike.

#### **4.7 The Dialogic Classroom and Transformative Learning and Pedagogy**

In the focus group interviews that I conducted, the first question to which students responded was:

1. Do you think you have changed or grown as a student of English and/or as a person since the beginning of last year? If so, in what ways?

Question 2 flowed from Question 1:

2. What is it about the way you have studied English over the past year and a bit that you think has changed the way you perceive yourself as a learner and/or as a person?

In response to these questions, students highlighted a range of issues that not only identified for me ways in which they perceived they had changed, but that also indicated a level of self-reflection that Mezirow and other adult transformative learning theorists recognise as a uniquely adult capacity (Taylor, 1998, p. 5).

Some of the areas of change identified by students included increased independence, a new sense of their capacity to control the learning process and, in the overwhelming majority of students, growth in self-confidence. In some instances, students directly attributed these changes to the nature of the dialogic classroom. For example, in response to Question 1, Cindy stated:

I've become more confident in my ability to make judgements about literature. I've come to realise that I don't have to view all texts as definitive or as good texts. I can develop my own opinions and make informed judgements (Focus Group Interview: 15.3.02).

In response to Question 2, Cindy later went on to say:

Class discussion in English has changed the way I perceive myself as a learner because I've come to realise that I'm allowed to have my own opinion on texts and that that is not the only opinion – and neither is the opinion of the teacher. Everyone in the class contributes. There are many interpretations of texts and so as long as my view can be supported then I am entitled to that view. This has contributed to my confidence again. By producing Major Works on my own and by having the root of my ideas coming from me and only really being guided by others has made me realise that my own ability to learn without being spoonfed is real (Focus Group Interview: 15.3.02).

Here Cindy acknowledges that the dialogic nature of our classroom contributed to a growth in confidence that triggered a change in her perception of her abilities as a learner. She realised, for the first time, that her own views about literature mattered and that the study of literature is about forming one's own views through interaction with others. For Cindy this was a new way of viewing the process of learning about literature: a perspective transformation. As a result, she began to trust her own opinions and this, in turn, helped her to approach major self-directed learning projects with a greater degree of confidence, to the point where she no longer felt the need to be "spoonfed".

In response to Question 1, Naomi said, "My previous English was all, um, was all really teacher-orientated, so they just gave you notes and sheets and you copied work off the board, but here it's more a chance to learn yourself, like from first-hand investigation" (8.2.02). Although Naomi does not refer directly to the



dialogic nature of the classroom, this is implicit in her reference to English not being “teacher-orientated”. Loretta, too, in response to Question 1, stated: “I think that I’ve become less apprehensive about writing my essays and getting my ideas down – not being scared to do that now is a big thing” (15.3.02). Then later, in response to Question 2, Loretta said, “The way we learn English through discussions has helped” (15.3.02).

In other instances, in commenting on how they felt they had changed, in response to Question 1, students did not directly refer to the classroom dynamics, but it is plausible to see a connection between the changes highlighted by students and this type of classroom. For example, in response to Question 1, Sandra said: “I think I have a lot more, like, control and more independence now...more motivation to do the work on my own, instead of being spoonfed, which is what I used to prefer” (5.2.02). In response to this statement, I asked Sandra, “What do you mean by ‘more control’?”, to which she replied, “Control as in focus and motivation to stay with what I’m doing.” Sandra’s new sense of control and independence may well have been developed, in part, through the dialogic English classroom of which she was a part.

As has been shown, a dialogic classroom may be confronting, and for some, like Belinda, this may inhibit the potential for transformative learning. But for many, I would argue that the mental and emotional push and pull of a dialogic classroom is potentially transformative precisely *because* it is confronting. Without the stimulation and challenge associated with the dialogic classroom, the critical reflection needed to trigger a perspective transformation is less likely to occur. Herrington and Cadman (1991) argue that collaborative learning amongst peers works to aid the critical reflection of students. They argue that students who have received peer reviews reflect “processes of weighing alternatives and then deciding how to act” (p. 184), which is really another way of describing critical thinking. This process of “weighing alternatives” can be seen in the following entry from the learning log of one of my students. In this entry, Esther describes the emergence of a more developed idea for her Major Work, resulting from participation in a whole class discussion about her embryonic ideas:

Today in class we sat in a circle and some people told the class of their initial and developing ideas for their creative writing piece which we are to write this term. I really liked this discussion, as it was a good opportunity to help others to extend their ideas and to gain feedback on my own ideas. At the start of today, my idea was pretty rough, but this afternoon I sat down and further extended my thoughts, and this is what I came up with...(Learning Log: 30.5.01).

In this entry, Esther highlights the fact that dialogic engagement with others was a precursor to her own reflection. Esther experienced what Mezirow (1991) terms the transformation of a meaning scheme. As Mezirow (1991) states:

The transformation of meaning schemes is integral to the process of reflection. As we assess our assumptions about the content or process of problem solving and find them unjustified, we create new ones or transform our old assumptions and hence our interpretations of experience. This is the dynamics of everyday reflective learning (p. 192).

Through listening to the ideas of others, Esther reassessed her own ideas and recognised that the content and process of her problem solving in relation to her Major Work needed revision.

A dialogic classroom opens students to a range of possibilities, encourages them to respect alternative points of view and implicitly opens them to an awareness that it is possible to revise their own meaning schemes and perspectives.

Experienced day by day, this type of classroom becomes a forum in which constant critical reflection may occur, and in which ideas about a range of issues may be shaped and re-shaped through dialogue with others. Above all else, the emergent dynamic in this type of classroom may change students' perceptions of themselves. Learning that all in the room may hold views but that no single view (including the teacher's) is definitive, and that an individual's perspectives may change through the constant interplay of ideas, produces a new type of confidence. This may be a truly transformative experience for students.

## 4.8 The Art of Pedagogy in the Dialogic Classroom

As a teacher in a dialogic classroom, I was open to the same vicissitudes associated with interpersonal dynamics as my students. It is risky to engage in a style of pedagogy that is largely unpredictable. It is also mentally and emotionally draining. As Brookfield (1990) states:

When conducted authentically, discussion is not an easy, soft option. It is intellectually taxing and emotionally unsettling. It requires participants to attend carefully to what others are saying. It places the responsibility for the success of the activity in students' hands as much as in the teacher's expertise, for even the most animatedly enthusiastic and well-informed leader can do little if students steadfastly refuse to respond (p. 114).

Pedagogy in the dialogic classroom needs to be flexible and requires a type of expertise that is responsive to individual learners and to the emergent dynamic between learners. Eisner (1979) describes this kind of teaching as

an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make judgments based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action. Qualitative forms of intelligence are used to select, control, and organize classroom qualities, such as tempo, tone, climate, pace of discussion, and forward movement. The teacher must "read" the emerging qualities and respond with qualities appropriate to the ends sought or the direction he wishes the students to take (p. 154).

This perception resonates with Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action and it highlights the fact that if the aim of teaching is to encourage the art of learning, then it must be responsive.

H.W. Janson, the noted art historian has said, "Artists are people who play hide-and-seek but do not know what they seek until they find it." In a similar sense teaching is a form of human action in which many of the ends achieved are emergent – that is to say, found in the course of interaction with students rather than preconceived and efficiently attained (Eisner, 1979, p. 154).

My self-reflection upon my students' comments about my style of teaching has led me to believe that pedagogy that is based on the belief that transformation is possible, and that seeks to foster transformative learning, requires a type of

leadership that both promotes and manages the inter-*play* of ideas. Eisner (1979) argues that

teachers who function artistically in the classroom not only provide children with important sources of artistic experience, they also provide a climate that welcomes exploration and risk taking and that cultivates the disposition to play. To be able to play with ideas is to feel free to throw them into new combinations, to experiment, and even to “fail” (p. 160).

I would stress, too, that classroom *management*, whilst important, is secondary to what might be termed artistic leadership, and indeed that the perception that “management” is occurring may all but disappear if this leadership exists within the classroom. Hayward (1997), in speaking of executive leadership in the business world, states, “While the scribblers chatter on that the world is determined by impersonal forces, business leaders today have come to see ever more clearly the essential role of personal forces in shaping our destiny” (p. xviii). He goes on to argue that

today in the era of downsizing, dynamic international competition, and overnight entrepreneurial start-ups, we increasingly prize the swash-buckling, risk-taking character of the entrepreneur over the bureaucracy of the manager. Even large enterprises today need to be able to transform themselves quickly with the same nimbleness as small companies. This requires above all the force of personal leadership rather than the ability to count beans (Hayward, 1997, p. xix).

In Excerpt 2, David remarked, “You steer us in the right direction. You manage the egos, too. You’re the facilitator and we feed off each other”. There is a reference here to management and, as stated previously, I would agree with David that the management of egos is necessary in a dialogic classroom, but perhaps it is more the “swash-buckling, risk-taking character of the entrepreneur over the bureaucracy of the manager” that is predominant. The risk-taking of the teacher is primarily based on trust – trust that students have the innate ability to learn through dialogue and discovery what they cannot learn through the didacticism of the pedagogue. It involves taking the risk that allowing *students* to take risks may result in personal transformation.

The following excerpt from one of the focus groups sheds more light on the nature of pedagogy that is transformative:

### Excerpt 6

**Cindy:** The class environment is very engaging, um, partially because of the way you teach. You encourage us to, um, begin and maintain our discussion without dictating ideas to be followed. I like the way you provide a basis [for discussion] and guidance. You allow us to evolve our ideas, but make sure we stay on track.

**Me:** Can you explain the way you see the nature of that class environment? What is it like? It might help you to use an image of some sort.

**Loretta:** It's like a building without a roof or fence. What I mean is, the foundations are there, you put them there, but we can build whatever we like. There is no roof or fence because you don't set boundaries for discovery, but there are still good foundations.

**Cindy:** Another way to look at it is that you provide us with a field and good soil with which to work but we provide the seeds ourselves, because we've got to come up with our own interpretations of literature. You weed out anything unsuitable and stop bugs and things ruining our crops. You stop ideas that are not really helpful, but you let it grow otherwise. You're the sunshine as well, because without your continual encouragement we would stagnate and perhaps even shrivel up. You're the fertilizer, too, that helps us to grow.

**Esther:** Everyone is free to say what they want (Focus Group Interview: 15.3.02).

Cindy sees my role here as one of encouraging dialogue “without dictating ideas to be followed.” Here she pinpoints the risk-taking of trusting that what ensues will be profitable for students. Of course, it is *not* always profitable, and that is where management comes in to play but more often than not, my trust in students has been vindicated, as they have contributed, explored, experimented and played with ideas in ways that have been profitable for the group.

The building and agricultural images used by the students in Excerpt 6 further highlight perceptions of my role in the learning process. In Loretta's image of “a building without a roof or fence” I, as the teacher, lay foundations, but without

preconceptions about how the building constructed by each individual will turn out. As Loretta goes on to say, “There is no roof or fence because you don’t set boundaries for discovery, but there are still good foundations.” Essentially, this description points to me as a facilitator of learning, rather than a dispenser of knowledge. The buildings will therefore be unique, not monochrome, as each individual is, to extend Loretta’s image, an architect responsible for his or her own design. The weeding and bug elimination processes are perhaps examples of the management necessary in certain instances, but the reference to being sunshine touches on the energy and encouragement that are even more central to growth. These are generative images that highlight the freedom students were given to reflect on the ideas of others and then to formulate their own. It is in this environment that an individual’s rigidly held ideas and perceptions of themselves as learners may be transformed. The comments made by students in the focus group interviews point to the fact that through actively engaging in discussion and through being receptive to others, their sense of confidence and of their own abilities grew.

A monologic approach to pedagogy (where print-offs of what the teacher alone perceives to be important knowledge are distributed to students) is, I would argue, ultimately disempowering, because students’ ideas do not enter into the equation. Indeed, it is regurgitation, rather than learning, that is taking place. Taken to the extreme, a monologic approach to teaching could involve a machine dispensing information to students, without the need for these students to ever make contact with the teacher or their fellow students. And why would this matter? According to students’ comments in these focus groups, it would matter because learning of any import, indeed that is potentially transformative, does not occur in isolation, but through dialogue. It does not occur in power-based relationships, predicated upon a polarisation of the knowing pedagogue and ignorant students, either. Transformative learning is a dialogic process.

## Chapter 5

### The Role of Peer Mentoring in Transformative Learning

*The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.*

Carl Jung

#### 5.1 The Importance of Peer Support

In the previous chapter, I explored the dialogic classroom because my students indicated that this was a primary factor influencing the nature of their learning. It is difficult to capture in writing the nature of interpersonal relationships because glances, gestures, and body language of all sorts convey a myriad of meanings that cannot be recaptured fully outside the moment in which they occurred. But to acknowledge the elusive and often ineffable nature of relationships in the classroom, between students, and between a teacher and his or her students, does not diminish the significance of these relationships. In my exploration of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, the importance of a dialogic approach to teaching and learning has been affirmed. The interplay between multiple voices in a classroom is not, however, the only context in which this dialogic approach may be experienced. In the context of the English classes that are the focus of this study, discussion tended to be centred upon ideas associated with the texts that we were studying. This context did not, however, provide students with the opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings about what they were learning if their ideas did not relate to the specific areas under discussion in the classroom. Furthermore, when I set substantial and challenging self-directed learning tasks for my students, I was aware that the stimulation and interaction of the dialogic classroom, that seemed to be of benefit to most of them, was missing.

As a teacher seeking ways to foster transformative learning in my students, I became aware of the importance of engaging in empathic dialogue with them. Yet as I listened to students' reflections, especially about the self-directed learning process, it became apparent to me that they also valued the spontaneous empathy

of their peers. This is the sort of empathy that is not reliant upon being able to *imagine* yourself in someone else's shoes, but that emerges naturally as two people actually walk a very similar road together. Brookfield (1990) puts it this way:

When speaking of surviving education, the factor that is recalled as being most crucial is a supportive learning community. Sometimes this community takes the form of a dyadic partnership, sometimes it is a larger group of between four and eight in size. Whatever its size, however, this community functions as a support network of learners who reassure each other that the feelings of inadequacy, confusion, and depression that they experience individually are not idiosyncratic but shared by all (p. 55).

I first introduced a peer mentoring program to my students because I believed that students in the same class, undertaking similar daunting self-directed learning tasks, journeying along the same bumpy road of choices, difficulties, frustrations and fears, would be able to offer one another unique support and help. Nevertheless, I did not have a detailed picture of what the benefits to my students would be. Through seeking out students' comments about the program, and through engaging in phenomenological observation and reflection, I came to discover its benefits were another important dimension of the transformative learning process for many students. Daloz (2000) recognises that "*our very selves* are constituted out of a lifelong dialogue with the ideas, predispositions, fears, longings, attitudes, and assorted wisdoms of our surroundings" (p. 120). Transformative learning theory rests on the belief that this dialogue may bring about ongoing revisions to the frames of reference held by individuals. Nevertheless, Edward Taylor (2000) mentions that the original model of transformative learning

gave only minor attention to the role of relationships generally in association with rational discourse and the final phases of a perspective with the intent of maximizing understanding between participants (Mezirow, 1995). This lack of attention is particularly manifested in the more subjective elements of relationships (trust, friendship, support) and their impact on transformative learning. These more subjective elements seem to provide the conditions essential for effective rational discourse (p. 306).



In this chapter I will explore some of these subjective elements of relationships that may help to foster transformative learning through a discussion of peer mentoring, primarily through analysing students' comments based on their first-hand experiences of being mentors to, and of being mentored by, their peers. I will also examine some of the weaknesses of the peer mentor program and will articulate some of the modifications and refinements I have made to future peer mentor programs in order to ensure that they might better foster transformative learning.

## 5.2 Mentoring in a Historical Context

The benefits flowing from a relationship in which one person is mentor to another appear to have been recognised for as long as humans have co-existed. Although the word “mentor” has its origins in Greek mythology, the concept of mentoring certainly predates Ancient Greek civilization. The Hebrew Bible, for example, documents several mentors, including Moses's role as mentor to Joshua. Historically, the term “mentor” first appeared in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Mentor was the trustworthy companion of Odysseus, the King of Ithaca. As he set off for the Trojan Wars, Odysseus instructed Mentor to raise the king's young son, Telemachus, in such a way that he would become a fit successor of Odysseus. To do so, “Mentor had to be a father figure, a teacher, a role model, an approachable counsellor, a trusted adviser, a challenger, an encourager, among other things to the young Telemachus in order that he would become, in time, a wise and good ruler” (Carruthers, 1993, p. 9).

One of the roles adopted by Mentor in his relationship with Telemachus was that of protector. This protective dimension of his role has “given rise to the use of the word ‘protégé’ from the French verb, *protéger*, to *protect*, for the one who is the recipient of mentor interest” (Carruthers, 1993, p. 9). Much of the literature on mentoring makes use of the terms “mentor” and “protégé”, although in more current literature there has been a trend toward the use of the new term “mentee”, to avoid the paternalism implicit in the term “protégé”.

It is not difficult to discern some of the benefits Telemachus would have derived from his relationship with Mentor. He was not left to fend for himself, but had someone nearby to offer him help and support in a range of ways. But what of the benefits to Mentor? These should not be underestimated. As Mentor undertook the roles of father figure, teacher, role model, counsellor, adviser and challenger, he would have reaped benefits himself. Maturity, empowerment and a sense of responsibility flow from being given a commission like the one Odysseus extended to Mentor. As he sought ways to effectively fulfil his commission, he inevitably would have been transformed.

In recent decades, mentoring has burgeoned in a range of fields as a practice that promotes personal development (Levinson and others, 1978; Murray, 1991; Wunsch, 1994; Cohen, 1995; Galbraith and Cohen, 1995; Hine and Ismail, 1997; Daloz, 1999; Parks, 2000).

### **5.3 The Context for the Peer Mentor Program**

The peer mentor program that I established with my students over the course of my research was a reciprocal one. Students were asked to team up with another student and were both to be mentored *by*, and a mentor *to* this person. Clearly, the most common mentor-mentee relationships, such as the one between Mentor and Telemachus, tend to be between a more experienced and perhaps more capable person, and a novice, or less experienced person. Indeed, soon after I established the peer mentor program with the Year 11 class that forms the basis of this study, one of my students, Anthony, queried in his learning log my juxtaposition of the terms “peer” and “mentor”:

A mentor, according to my Macquarie Concise Dictionary, is “a wise and trusted counsellor,... especially ...a person who is considered to have sufficient experience to be able to assist others less experienced”. A peer, however, is “someone who ranks with another...[as] an equal”. Clearly these terms form a blatant oxymoron (Learning Log: 3.4.01).

Technically, of course, Anthony is right! I was, however, struck by the fact that many of the responsibilities and challenges of mentorship, and many of the

benefits derived from being a mentee, could be experienced amongst peers of equal experience, who nonetheless were commissioned with these roles. I found that as students rose to the challenge of reciprocally mentoring one another, they came to discover that, paradoxically, they could both remain a peer (with all of the comforting connotations of equality that this term holds), whilst at the same time adopting the role of mentor. In this context, the term “mentor” was not a label signifying status or experience in relation to another. Rather, it was a mindset, attitude or role which the students were able to take on and off like a cap, and even while wearing the cap, they and their mentee (who also at various times was their mentor!) were nevertheless peers.

In the first year of my research, I established the peer mentor program with my Year 10 class as a means of providing support for my Year 10 students as they undertook a challenging self-directed learning task. This task was known as their Major Work and was, in effect, a long essay on a literary topic of their choice. (I elaborate more fully on the nature of this task and its transformative impact on students in Chapter 8). In the two years over which my research took place, I modified and refined this peer mentor program in response to the feedback I received from students and the observations that I made.

In the first year of the program, I worked with students as they explored various areas of interest and eventually arrived at an essay topic for their Major Work. Once they had defined the parameters of their topic, I assisted them to find a peer mentor who shared a similar, or at least compatible area of literary interest. This was not always possible, but in most instances I was able to organise mentor partnerships between students who shared similar interests.

In this inaugural year, and whenever I subsequently introduced the program to my students, I asked them to discuss with their mentor what they hoped to gain from their peer mentor relationship. I indicated that whilst the goal of the mentor program was for them to be supported and helped by one of their peers, and for them to offer help and support in return, the nature of what constituted support and help would differ from person to person. I asked students to spend some time discussing what they hoped to gain from one another, and then to record a

summary of this discussion in their learning logs. As students worked on their Major Works, they reflected upon their progress in their learning logs and these frequently contained references to their peer mentors and to their thoughts and feelings about their mentor-mentee relationship. In the focus group interviews that I conducted near the end of my research, students again commented on the peer mentor program. In the following section, I draw on these verbal and written comments from my students, and my own observations, in an attempt to identify some of the major benefits of the peer mentor program. I also seek to explore the dimensions of peer mentoring that may help to foster transformative learning.

## **5.4 A Peer Mentor as a Sounding Board**

One of the recurrent comments made by students is that it was helpful for them to have a peer mentor with whom to discuss their thoughts. This enabled them to test or experiment with their embryonic ideas in a safe, non-threatening context. Their peer mentor could then respond, and a free flow of ideas could develop, without any sense that these ideas were final or would be judged or criticised. In short, mentor and mentee could engage in discussion that in a sense constituted a kind of verbal rough draft.

In the focus group interview of which he was a part, David made the following comment about his mentor, James: “James was good for bouncing ideas off and proofreading and stuff. I faxed a whole lot of stuff to James and he gave it back with red pen over it, saying, ‘Why don’t you consider this?’ That was helpful” (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

Also in a focus group interview, the following comments emerged:

**Colin:** I found that when we were doing the Major Work, having talked to Joshua [Colin’s peer mentor] – although we didn’t do this as regularly as we really should have – we threw ideas off each other and that helped me get better ideas and I think it might have helped Joshua.

**Me:** I think it did help Joshua because, if I remember rightly, Joshua actually reflected on that in his logs. Is that right, Joshua?

**Joshua:** Yeah. Writing it yourself you can't tell – it's hard to tell the quality of it after you've written it, and picking up things that sound odd, you don't notice when you've written it.

**Penny:** Yes, getting input from somebody else really helps there (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

Judy, in reflecting upon what she and her mentor-mentee, Sandra, hoped to achieve from the program, wrote the following in her learning log:

Our plans for the mentor situation are simply to be as supportive as we can be to one another's needs. This will include giving feedback on writing tasks and larger assignments, as well as sharing our views on different topics so that we may both reach a greater level of understanding.

Our plans for supporting one another's individual major works include: presenting flaws or holes that the other may not see in their vision; giving new ideas; pointing out areas that may need more work; and acknowledging when the other has produced something great (Learning Log: 14.2.01).

About six weeks later, Judy indicated that these objectives were already being realised in her mentor-mentee relationship with Sandra:

The mentoring process appears to be really helpful, in regard to brainstorming ideas and using your mentor as a kind of sounding board to express what you're trying to say. I think in order for it to be really beneficial, there needs to be more class time devoted to peer mentoring each week (Learning Log: 31.3.01).

Before she left the class, Belinda also endorsed the benefits of having a mentor who could offer a different perspective on her work:

I think having a mentor is a great idea. It gives me another opinion before my work is handed in. Having someone to toss ideas around with me and having someone to point out where improvement is needed helps raise the standard of my work (Learning Log: 5.3.01).

All of these comments point to the fact that many students valued having a mentor because it provided them with a means of broadening their perspectives and of testing their ideas in a safe context. David appreciated the fact that James took the time to read over his work and to suggest further areas for consideration. It is

interesting to note that, in a sense, James adopted the role of teacher, replete with red pen and all! As James engaged in reflective discourse with David (in this instance in written form), he recognised the need to offer ideas that might be helpful to his mentee. The very fact that David faxed work to James seems, in a sense, to have empowered James to respond as a mentor would, by offering suggestions that he thought would be helpful to David and that might challenge David to alter his meaning schemes. Gehrels (1984), in his study of elementary school principals, concluded that “the helping process is one of helping others recognize perspectives, of trusting them to accept their own values and beliefs, so that the other person then can engage on a personal journey of self-transformation and integration” (p. 156) (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 307). This helping process was evident in the peer mentor relationship that David and James shared.

Colin, too, talks about his mentor-mentee relationship with Joshua, and how they “threw ideas off each other”. Colin comments that this process helped him to “get better ideas” and Joshua acknowledges that Colin’s mentoring was useful because it offered him a degree of objectivity when he felt too close to his own work: “Writing it yourself you can’t tell – it’s hard to tell the quality of it after you’ve written it, and picking up things that sound odd, you don’t notice when you’ve written it.”

Judy and Sandra also recognised the cognitive benefit of gleaning ideas from one another, seeing the sharing of perspectives as, in Judy’s words, a means by which both of them might “reach a greater level of understanding”. Belinda’s learning log entry also highlights her belief that the standard of her work was raised as a result of having a mentor to “toss ideas around with”. In her later learning log entry, Judy highlights the benefits of having a mentor as a “sounding board”, or as someone with whom she could share and test her ideas. The fact that her peer mentor could listen to her ideas, even when they were tentative, (someone who hears what you are “trying to say”) was clearly of the utmost importance to Judy.

This idea of the mentor functioning as a sounding board for the mentee is clearly evident in all these students’ comments. As students open themselves to other ways of seeing by seeking feedback and fresh perspectives from their peer

mentors, they are likely to confront perspectives that challenge their own. This is a potentially transformative experience. As Mezirow (1991) states:

Because communicative learning involves dealing with the ideas of others, it frequently requires us to confront the unknown. When we confront the unknown – that is, when the properties of an experience do not fit our expectations or further differentiation is called for – our reflection may result in the creation of new meaning schemes or habits of expectation to integrate these properties. Over time, a limited initial understanding may become transformed through metaphorical thought as we come to discover the significance of this understanding in other experiential, theoretical, literary, or aesthetic contexts (pp. 82-83).

I would argue that peer mentoring, one form of communicative learning, promotes transformative learning and that the role of mentor should not be considered an exclusively adult role. The mentor-mentee relationship is potentially transformative because it is grounded in the experiences of both the mentor and the mentee and because it promotes critical reflection through discourse that is both rational and that recognises the affective dimensions of learning. At one point in his learning log, one of my students, James, critically reflected on his mentee David's work:

Upon speaking with David today about his major work, I realised that he is having some trouble deciding upon a topic. I have tried to brainstorm a few ideas for him to ponder, as this is one of the areas we decided to concentrate our help upon (Learning Log: 15.3.01).

Here James has engaged in dialogue with David, tuned in to David's chief difficulty, critically reflected upon David's situation and sought strategies to help him. Adopting the role of mentor not only has the capacity to trigger critical reflection in the mentee, but also to trigger critical reflection in the mentor.

## **5.5 Mentoring and Metacognition: A Transformative Connection**

In a later learning log entry, James stated:

Over the past few days I have been able to read David's first and third drafts of his essay. Much like my first draft, it was very vague and had too much 'floury' language. His points were a little disjointed. Spellcheck also hadn't been used but these elements were fixed. His third draft was of a much higher standard as he had simplified his language and drawn more precise conclusions.... I believe it is a very difficult topic that he has undertaken.... He has worked like a machine over the past few weeks trying to get this completed as he struggled with a topic.... I am very happy with David's most recent draft and expect him to most definitely get in the 14-15 out of 15 mark range (Learning Log: 28.4.01).

This entry shows James's commitment to David's progress. He has identified weaknesses in David's writing style and has reflected on the fact that he has confronted similar stylistic difficulties himself. ("Much like my first draft, [David's] was very vague and had too much 'floury' language.") Through the act of mentoring, James has become more finely attuned to his own weaknesses and is able to reflect upon ways of improving his own, as well as David's work. He has also expressed satisfaction with David's work, reflecting a (right) belief that he is partly responsible for David's improvement. James's confidence in his ability to make constructive judgements grew as he mentored David and this was an important dimension of the transformative learning process for him. His view of himself began to change as he realised he could make a positive difference to the learning experience of one of his peers.

It was clear to me, as an observer and as a regular reader of James's learning log, that through mentoring David, James's ability to critically reflect upon David's work and his capacity to engage in metacognition developed. Upon the completion of one of his Major Works, David commented on the benefits of James's mentoring:

I was particularly happy with my Major Work.... Mentoring was also a good thing. James was particularly helpful to me.... He prompted me to consider new ideas and ways of seeing things related to my topic. Sometimes I felt stuck, but he kind of gave me a kick-start by making suggestions (Learning Log: 2.5.01).



When embarking upon a later Major Work, a creative composition to be loosely based on the topic of “journey” but written in a form of his own choice, David made the following comment about James’s mentoring in his learning log:

While I continue to be frustrated by the fact that my Major Work is going nowhere, there has been a lot of recent development in James’s work. Although starting with a piece on “The Journey of Australia” from a historical perspective, he, too, began to experience difficulties. As a result of this, he has decided to change his topic to a diary of a mother whose son is at war. His initial ideas for this sound very promising. Such a positive move has prompted me to consider changing topics in the hope that I can kick-start my stagnant Major Work (Learning Log: 28.6.01).

Here David indicates that James’s decision to drop a topic with which he was not making headway, in favour of a new one, inspired him to consider doing the same. James’s example, rather than his ideas, made a positive impact on David. This is evidence of the mutual benefit flowing from a reciprocal peer mentor relationship. As both James and David were mentors to each other, and so slipped in and out of the mentor and mentee roles accordingly, their reflections upon one another’s work in their capacity as mentor inevitably impacted upon their responses to their own work. Here, and in other instances, simultaneously adopting the roles of both mentor and mentee promoted critical reflection and critical self-reflection in my students.

The connections between metacognition, self-reflection and mentoring have generated considerable interest amongst researchers. Forrest-Pressley, MacKinnon and Waller (1985) and Hine and Ismail (1997) have argued that metacognitive ability can be used to significantly improve and modify an individual’s processing strategies. This metacognitive ability is developed through mentoring. Mentors need to think about thinking (their own and another’s) as they consider ways to make a positive impact on their mentees. If a mentor thinks specifically about his or her mentee’s idiosyncratic style of learning, strengths and weaknesses, he or she is exercising a high order skill that has the capacity to transform both the mentor and the mentee.

A lot of the research on the mentoring of adults resonates with my observations emerging from my own research in a high school context. One such adult mentoring program was the DART Training of Trainers Model which “was conceived primarily to provide in-service to supervisory staff in infant/toddler centers and family child care where there was little specific training available” (Restaino-Keller and Moss Handle, 1996, p. 287). The model relied on mentoring to achieve its primary aim of the transformation of those involved. Some of the activities initiated by the mentors in the DART Mentor Teacher training program strike me as being effective strategies for all mentors if their aim is the facilitation of change in the mentee:

By engaging in dialogue, setting tasks and exercises, creating dichotomies, the mentor challenges the protégé and forces a situation of cognitive dissonance and reflection. The protégé is enabled and empowered by the experience, thus creating a new perspective and a new vision. Seeing the world through new eyes is a transformative process. Participants in the DART Mentor Teacher training experienced changes in the areas of: self-confidence in their supervisory growth, greater willingness to collaborate in their supervisor/staff interactions, improvement in the quality of supervisor/staff interactions, and an increase in their professional development due to transformation of their self-perceptions related to education (Restaino-Keller and Moss Handle, 1996, p. 287).

It is clear from my students’ learning log entries and from their comments in focus group interviews that in an attempt to help their mentee, many of them instinctively employed these strategies delineated by Restaino-Keller and Moss Handle. When James challenged David’s ideas and made suggestions for David to consider, he was forcing “cognitive dissonance and reflection” in David. It was evident from David’s comments expressing appreciation of James’s mentoring and from the quality of David’s completed work, that David was “enabled and empowered by the experience”. The “new perspective” or “new vision” given to my students by their peer mentors was often transformative for them, as it was for those who benefited from the DART Mentor Teacher training program. Through the peer mentor relationship, my students not only were exposed to new ideas but their self-concepts frequently altered as their peers provided affirmation of their work. They were also transformed as a result of taking on the role of mentor. As

students considered ways of helping their mentees, their metacognitive capacities were developed. They found themselves needing to consider their mentee's particular strengths, weaknesses, predilections and needs in order to offer them the type of assistance that might be useful to them. In short, they had to think about the thinking (and feeling) processes of another in ways that stretched them and transformed them. In one of her learning log entries, Sandra demonstrates this capacity:

For me to be more of a help to Judy, I think I just need to be more interested and inspiring. She is an extremely talented person, however she doesn't seem to be reaching her full capability and it is partly my responsibility as mentor to encourage her to manage her time better and be a lot more interested in what she is doing.

Even though she is one of my best friends, Judy is still somewhat intimidating and I know I'm not the only one to think this. To improve as a mentor I must overcome this fear and give my opinion openly and intelligently. Most of the time when Judy comes to me wanting help as her mentor, she has already made up her mind, but wishes for me to confirm it. This term I would like to be able to make the suggestions to her (Learning Log: 2.5.01).

In this entry, Sandra shows an ability to think about both Judy's approach to learning and her own responses to Judy in her role as her mentor. Sandra identifies Judy's strength ("She is an extremely talented person..."), and also areas where she needs to improve, such as in her time management and receptivity to the ideas of others. She also reveals that she has thoughtfully reflected upon ways in which she could be a better mentor when she highlights the fact that she needs to be "more interested and inspiring" and "to encourage her to manage her time better". Finally, Sandra expresses an awareness that she needs to be less intimidated by Judy and more assertive in her mentor-mentee relationship with her. These insights reveal maturity and an increased capacity for reflection and self-reflection forged, in part, through Sandra's adoption of the role of peer mentor to Judy.

## 5.6 The Affective Benefits of the Peer Mentor Program

Whilst many students expressed the view that their mentor was valuable as a sounding board, and whilst the adoption of the role of mentor clearly developed the cognitive and metacognitive skills of students, the affective dimensions of the peer mentor program seemed to be valued by an even greater number of students. In particular, students frequently expressed that they valued the emotional reassurance, empathy and encouragement offered to them by their mentor. Edward Taylor (2000) foregrounds the importance of relationships in helping individuals through the transformative learning process: “It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the necessary openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, which is essential for managing the threatening and emotionally charged experience of transformation” (p. 308).

In one of the focus group interviews, David and James commented on their peer mentor relationship:

**David:** I talked to James all the time and it was good because we were both at the same stage most of the time. It was nice to know that I wasn't there by myself going, “Oh my gosh, everyone else has written 2 000 words and I haven't done anything.”

**James:** I think at crisis point, um, you kind of really need them [your peer mentor]. (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

The reassurance of knowing that they were not alone is what underpins these comments made by James and David. It is the recognition that someone can empathise because they are experiencing similar challenges and frustrations. A similar appreciation of the empathy and encouragement of her peer mentor was expressed by Cathy in her Reflection Statement, composed at the completion of one of her Major Works in the first year of my research:

Peer mentoring was another excellent source of support and information. There were definitely times when I was ready to give up on the whole Major Work, but when I found Lauren was going through the same problems I was and we could both sit back and let off steam, it made it much easier to continue. Lauren was of so much help as she was always there to listen to my ideas and make every positive comment she could possibly think of.

When I became very cynical about the whole project, she would sit there and have a laugh with me, helping to keep things in perspective. I don't know how I would have managed if Lauren wasn't my peer mentor. She was a constant stream of encouragement and humour, making the whole process just that little bit easier (Reflection Statement: 3.9.00).

Cathy's appreciation of her mentor's encouragement, and of her sense of humour and perspective, again reveals the importance of the affective dimensions of the peer mentor relationship. Cathy valued Lauren for her capacity to make her feel better about her situation and her ideas, rather than for any particular insights that she shared with her. Cathy's comments demonstrate that emotional responses to learning situations are very powerful and that without the support of empathic others, they can be overwhelming: "I don't know how I would have managed if Lauren wasn't my peer mentor."

The capacity for a peer mentor to act as a catalyst for a positive change in emotion was also significant for some students. For example, in a focus group interview Sandra stated:

The peer mentoring helped me to get from feeling stressed to feeling more confident. Judy helped to motivate me and gave me a bit of a kick when I needed it. She helped me motivationally and gave me her advice on what she thought I could add and that sort of thing (Focus Group Interview: 5.2.02).

Here Sandra expresses the fact that the support of her mentor was instrumental in her experience of an emotional shift "from feeling stressed to feeling more confident". She also acknowledges the fact that she needed to receive "a bit of a kick" from Judy from time to time. The need to receive extrinsic motivation was common amongst my students. When they were engaged in self-directed learning tasks, where the onus was on them to set personal short term goals, the intermittent intervention of a peer mentor to ensure that they remained on track was seen by many students as a great asset. Many students found that their peer mentor fulfilled their need both for a push and for reassurance and encouragement. Like Sandra, Belinda highlighted the meeting of these emotional needs as priorities that she and her mentor, Elizabeth, agreed upon when they first discussed what they hoped to gain from their peer mentor relationship:

The things that Elizabeth wants from a mentor are basically the same things that I want from her as a mentor. We both have a tendency to be a bit on the lazy side, so we both need a little push. We want each other to be critical and honest so our work can be improved, and we both want lots of encouragement to help with the confidence issue. Hopefully Elizabeth will give me the push I need, and hopefully I will satisfy her as a mentor (Learning Log: 15.3.01).

Taking on the role of mentor requires striking the balance between being “critical and honest” and being encouraging and supportive. Moreover, when being mentors to their peers, students need to be able to critically reflect upon the differences between their own needs and their mentee’s needs. This requires considerable metacognitive ability. I observed that as students took on the responsibility of mentoring a peer, they developed an increased capacity to engage in metacognition and to respond to the emotional nuances expressed by others. Sandra, for example, recognised that because she and her peer mentor, Judy, had different temperaments, they would therefore need to approach their mentoring differently:

The two of us want advice, however with Judy’s confidence she is looking for a more critical appraisal of her work, whilst I am after support and help from her as my mentor. We will both work as an adviser to the other, but will offer that advice to each other in different ways (Learning Log: 30.3.01).

It is clear from this log entry that the affective dimension of the peer mentor relationship was more important for Sandra than it was for her peer mentor/mentee, Judy. Like Judy, another student, Alan, did not want reassurance, so much as a periodic push from his mentor:

Basically I regard the mentoring process as more of a motivational scheme than anything else. I think having a mentor and needing to be constantly aware of the state and progress of their work forces you to keep pace. This is very useful in my case as procrastination is one of my major drawbacks, and a hindrance in the context of actually finishing before a deadline. So I suppose I rely on my mentor to ensure I am completing my work at a satisfactory pace (Learning Log: 28.3.01).

Implicit in Alan's desire for the mentoring process to function as "a motivational scheme" is his need to feel accountable to someone. Quite a few peer mentor pairs established their own methods of being held accountable to one another for the duration of their Major Works. Tanya, for example, commented on the arrangement she made with her peer mentor, Naomi:

For both of us, the number one priority is to be pushed a bit. I can definitely see myself getting a bit lazy with my writing, as can Naomi, so we agreed to show each other our work each Friday to make us accountable to one another (Learning Log: 14.2.01).

As students assumed the role of mentor, their sense of responsibility to their mentee frequently increased. In one of his log entries, Ashley revealed a capacity to take initiative and to seek a greater level of accountability and commitment in his peer mentor relationship:

My peer mentor and I have not discussed much about our Major Works, but I intend to organise a session either at lunchtime or in a free period some time soon so we can discuss our perspectives on each others' work (Learning Log: 4.4.01).

In reading and analysing students' learning logs, it emerged that the degree to which students craved emotional support from their mentor differed, as did the type of emotional support that they felt they needed. Some felt a primary need to be motivated, whilst others needed, above all else, to be encouraged. Feedback from students also indicated that the vast majority of students desired and appreciated both cognitive and affective support from their mentor. This balance is evident in the research undertaken by Bond (1999) who argues that fundamental to a range of mentoring activities is

the facilitation of change through encouragement, support, belief in others' potential, pushing, challenging, questioning, guiding, listening, advising, training, providing opportunities and alternative views, opening doors, leading by example, inspiring a vision, empowering and being non-judgemental (p. 1).

This list includes active and passive aspects of the mentor role and it highlights the fusion of cognitive and affective dimensions. A mentor who is only interested in pushing, advising and training may well be alienating; a mentor who is only

interested in listening, being non-judgemental and providing support, may not provide the challenge necessary to trigger critical reflection in the mentee. Striking a balance between the cognitive and affective dimensions of mentoring may well be the key to successful facilitation of transformation in the mentee. Mezirow (1991; 1998) describes the process of critical self-reflection, which I would argue can be triggered through the mentoring relationship, and which ultimately may lead to transformation, as conscious and rational. A mentor can, indeed, offer a rational perspective on the work of another, but without an affective dimension to the mentoring process, rational perspectives may never be properly interpreted, understood or acted on. As Edward Taylor (2000) states: “It is through establishing trustful relationships that individuals can have questioning discussions wherein information can be shared openly and mutual and consensual understanding be achieved” (p. 307). My students’ responses point to the fact that the transformative learning process is not fostered by a mentor merely having right ideas or answers to problems. In addition, students became aware that it was important for them in their capacity as a mentor to communicate with their mentee in such a way that the mentee was able to formulate his or her *own* ideas and answers to problems. Assisting an individual as they search for their own meaning requires empathy, sensitivity and an ability to listen, as well as an ability to engage in reflective discourse. As my students mentored one another, I observed a growth in their capacity to respond empathically to one another.

Baird’s (1993) recognition of the connection between cognitive and affective dimensions of mentoring emerged as a result of his experiences working with secondary school teachers on two main research projects: the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) and Teaching and Learning Science in Schools (TLSS). He came to view his role as a mentor as “a solid amalgam of Helper + Sharer + Carer” (Baird, 1993, p. 55). In his elaboration of this view of a mentor, Baird (1993) acknowledges the fusion of the cognitive and affective dimensions of the role:

This triplet of pro-social attributes blends cognitive responsibilities (e.g. adviser, guide) with the affective caring and sharing that enrich the relationship for both parties. As such, typical mentor behaviours should best be described dualistically –



a caring listener, a critical friend, a concerned adviser. As a caring listener, for instance, you hear more than they say – you are attuned to the subtle, personal communications that provide information necessary to inform your response and strengthen the value of the relationship to them. Important affective aspects of the role involve respect, sensitivity, perceptiveness, care, concern, encouragement and enthusiasm. A primary objective of the mentor is to emancipate, not just to advise (p. 55).

Baird’s model of mentoring, with its emphasis on the emancipation of the mentee, highlights several dimensions that are conducive to the facilitation of transformative learning.

## **5.7 Peer Mentor Relationships: The Compatibility Factor**

Perhaps the most striking discovery emerging from my informal conversations with students, from the focus group discussions and from reading their learning logs was that, on the whole, the greater the friendship shared by peer mentor pairs, the more successful was their reciprocal peer mentor relationship. I mentioned earlier that in the first year of my research and of establishing a peer mentor program with my students, I assisted students to establish mentor partnerships based on the compatibility of their Major Work topics. The topics that students chose to explore and their peer mentor groupings are listed below:

### **Group One**

Representations of Rural Australia in the works of  
Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson

**Cindy**

Representations of Death: An Analysis of Poems by  
John Donne, Seamus Heaney and Wilfred Owen

**Rochelle**

Voices of Death: An Analysis of the Portrayal of  
Death in Poetry

**Virginia**

## **Group Two**

The Alienation of the Individual from Society in  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and  
*The Catcher in the Rye*

**Alan**

A Comparison of Captivity under the Nazis and Nippon

**Albert**

## **Group Three**

The Nature of Perfection: A Study of Utopias

**Roger**

The Greatest Reward of All: A Comparison of  
*The Brendan Voyage* and *South With Scott*

**Charles**

The Invasion of Privacy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and  
*The Truman Show*

**Naomi**

## **Group Four**

Women in their Cultural Contexts: An Insight into the  
Lives of a Japanese Geisha and an Indian Housewife

**Carmel**

The Expectations of Women in *Tully* and *Memoirs of  
a Geisha*

**Melanie**

Contemporary American Women: *Tully* and *A Night  
Without Armor*

**Donna**

## **Group Five**

The Effect of a Journey: An Analysis of  
*Never Tell Me Never* and *Searching for Charmian*

**Lauren**

The Changing Roles of Women: An Analysis of  
*From Strength to Strength* and *Fence Around the Cuckoo*

**Cathy**

### **Group Six**

“I’m Special, So Special”: *Anne Frank*:  
*The Diary of a Young Girl*, *My Place* and *Go Ask Alice*

**Eleanor**

The Chill Factor: An Examination of the Horror Genre  
through the study of *Interview with the Vampire* and  
*Frankenstein*

**Kathleen**

### **Group Seven**

A Comparison of *Racial Discrimination in*  
*The Power of One* and *The Chamber*

**Craig**

Racial Prejudice in *Tandia* and *The Chamber*

**Kay**

### **Group Eight**

The Importance of Journeys in  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**Kevin**

Humour in *Notes from a Small Island* and  
*The Wrong Way Home*

**Tom**

### **Group Nine**

The Fantasy Genre

**John**

The Creation of Fantasy Worlds

**Adam**

Even a cursory perusal of this list of critical Major Work topics and the corresponding peer mentor combinations reveals that my attempt to draw students together in peer mentor partnerships based on the compatibility of their areas of interest was not always easy. This can be seen by the fact that in three instances, students worked in peer mentor trios, rather than pairs. This was due to the fact that three students' topics overlapped to such an extent that it seemed best to group them all together. To some extent, establishing peer mentor groupings was a logistical exercise. I did not want groups to exceed three and, where possible, I hoped to limit groups to two. This meant that, as I did not want to restrict students' choice of topic, the peer mentor groupings were not always ideal. For example, one combination of three, Group One, was drawn together merely on the basis that all students were exploring poetry. Now whilst Rochelle and Virginia were investigating a similar thematic concern, death, in their poems of choice, Cindy's interest in representations of rural Australia in poetry was not at all thematically related to Rochelle's and Virginia's investigations. By contrast, Carmel, Melanie and Donna formed a more compatible combination in Group Four, as all three students explored women in literature and all were interested in issues of cultural significance, although there were considerable variations in the focus of each student's work. In Group Three, Roger's exploration of utopias and dystopias in fiction and Naomi's comparative analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Truman Show* were highly compatible, whilst Charles's topic was more compatible with Tom's and Kevin's explorations of journeys in Group Eight. The reason for grouping Charles with Roger and Naomi, rather than with Tom and Kevin, was because when the groups were first formed, Charles's initial ideas for his Major Work were closely related to Roger's and Naomi's ideas. However, he changed topics and by this stage it was too late to alter the peer mentor combinations.

In this first year of the peer mentor program, I did my best to establish peer mentor combinations that I believed would provide common ground for discussion. What I learnt was that the compatibility of the personalities involved was far more important than the compatibility of their areas of interest. During the course of the peer mentor program, students expressed the benefits of feeling comfortable with their peer mentor and, conversely, the frustration associated with

feeling uncomfortable with a peer mentor that they did not know very well, or with whom they did not get on well. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with their peer mentor combination in their learning logs. Kevin, for example, made the following comment in his Reflection Statement at the conclusion of his Major Work and of the peer mentor program:

The peer mentor process was really beneficial for some, but I was paired up with Tom and we didn't work together all that frequently. This meant that we didn't utilise the peer mentor system to its full potential. I think this was because we don't have a lot in common and so we didn't really find it very easy to talk to each other (Reflection Statement: 9.9.00).

John made a similar comment in his learning log: "Even though my mentor Adam and I are both doing Major Works on fantasy, I find his ideas really irritating, and most of the time I would rather work by myself than share my views with him" (Learning Log: 3.5.00).

In addition to these written comments, other students expressed to me in person that they were finding it difficult to relate to their peer mentor. As a result of my experiences in this first year, I realised that in future I would need to alter my approach to peer mentor groupings.

In the second year of my research, I again established a peer mentor program with the Year 11 class that formed the basis of my ongoing research. (Six of these students had also been in my class the year before, when I had first developed the peer mentor program). This time, however, I gave students permission to form their own peer mentor combinations. In most instances, this worked extremely well. Judy, for example, forecasted in one of her initial learning log entries what she perceived to be the benefits of the fact that her peer mentor was to be her best friend, Sandra:

Sandra and I are great friends and I am really grateful that we have been placed in the same class. I see our friendship as being a real positive with the peer mentoring, for we are already comfortable with each other and so we do not hold back on speaking our minds. The fact that both of us are boarders adds an extra plus to the situation. This extra time spent together will

mean that we can give each other a lot of assistance with the topics and common work.... I think that the two of us will work really well together and I am pleased to have Sandra as my mentor. I feel that she will really provide me with the assistance that I need (Learning Log: 14.2.01).

The fact that as good friends they were “already comfortable with each other” was a positive for Judy. She believed that she and Sandra would be less inhibited with one another (“we do not hold back on speaking our minds”) in their peer mentor relationship due to the fact that, as friends, they felt comfortable with one another. Sandra echoed Judy’s views about their peer mentor relationship:

Judy and I have an advantage over the rest of the class when it comes to mentoring. We are boarders and close friends. Boarders are more than friends, more like sisters. The relationship that Judy and I have is no exception to this. Polite formalities between the two of us are unnecessary. We are both comfortable with being completely honest with each other (Learning Log: 30.3.01).

In a similar vein to Judy, here Sandra posits that her friendship with Judy will ensure that they are “completely honest” with each other. This honesty is clearly viewed by both students as a prerequisite for an effective peer mentor relationship.

Penny also identified the value of having a peer mentor who is a friend:

I’m lucky that I’m really good friends with Alan, my mentor, as that means that I am comfortable asking questions and requesting advice from him. I hope that he will be both honest and critical, while at the same time offering me advice on how I might improve my writing (Learning Log: 25.3.01).

The knowledge of a person that emerges as a result of a friendship may also be an asset to a peer mentor relationship. Tanya, for example, made the following comment about her peer mentor, Naomi:

I’m the type of learner who needs to be nagged and pressured into getting things done, because otherwise I’m likely to leave it to the last minute, as I have with this essay. So I think my mentor has been very effective, largely because she knows me so well and realises that I need to be nagged.... I’ve really appreciated

Naomi's mentoring this term. I feel she has been an excellent motivator (Learning Log: 23.5.01).

Here Tanya expresses appreciation of the fact that, by virtue of their friendship, Naomi possesses knowledge of her strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, however, a few months prior to this entry Tanya had expressed concern about a potential negative for their mentor relationship that could emerge as a result of their friendship. In identifying the second priority (after being "pushed a bit") that she and Naomi established at the inception of their peer mentor relationship, Tanya stated:

The second thing both of us want – the one thing that might in fact be hindered by the closeness of our friendship – is criticism. We agreed to be blunt and to take nothing personally. However, as I usually put a lot of effort into my English pieces, I'll find it hard not to take anything personally. Oh well, in the interest of improvement, I'll have to deal with it! (Learning Log: 14.2.01).

Contrary to Sandra's and Judy's belief that their friendship was likely to ensure a high level of honesty in their peer mentor relationship, Tanya expresses a fear that her friendship with Naomi may hinder honest communication in their peer mentor relationship. This is presumably because she believes that they both may resist offering that criticism for fear that this could jeopardise the friendship. In spite of the fact that Tanya and Naomi obviously resolved not to take criticism personally, Tanya admits to her residual feelings of vulnerability: "...as I usually put a lot of effort into my English pieces, I'll find it hard not to take anything personally." Nevertheless, both she and Naomi express that the fact that they were friends was more of a positive than a negative when it came to their peer mentor relationship. In the focus group interview of which they were a part, held about a year after these initial learning log entries were written, Naomi looked back on her peer mentor relationship with Tanya:

We were good friends anyway, so it's easy to talk to Tanya about anything.... I feel comfortable going to her and saying, "Yeah I really don't have a clue what's going on." But Tanya is someone I could say that to, whereas I'd probably feel a bit stupid saying that to you (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

Again, the notion of feeling comfortable is emphasised, and this is linked to the interesting dimension of saving face, or feeling safe enough to admit inadequacies. Alan, too, in a different focus group interview, commented on this dimension of the peer mentor relationship:

**Alan:** It's also good in the sense that, um, sometimes when you're not entirely sure of what's involved in something, and you think you know what you're meant to do, but you're not quite sure, it's really good to have a mentor there, because at least you know if you do it wrong, you've got a friend [laugh].

**Me:** [laugh] A friend to muck it up with?

**Alan:** [laugh] Yes (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

Not surprisingly, the more comfortable my students felt with their peer mentor, the more willing they were to admit to their struggles and confusion. For many, their comfort level was associated with the extent to which they would consider themselves friends with their peer mentor. Restaino-Keller and Moss Handle (1996), in the context of their analysis of the DART Mentor Teacher model, state:

The concept of transformation is implicit in the mentoring relationship. The mentor's role enables and empowers the protégé to transform in a way which mediates the risks involved in the process. Mentoring as a helping relationship is a support system. It forms the basis for exploring greater independence from childhood insecurity and growth into adulthood, leading one to professional development (p. 286).

When my students felt comfortable with their peer mentor, they expressed a similar relief that the risks inherent in the challenging tasks that they confronted were indeed mediated by their peer mentor and, as a result, they felt empowered to overcome a range of obstacles.

The importance of students feeling comfortable with their peer mentor was further reinforced for me through comments from students who did *not* feel comfortable with their peer mentor. Whilst I gave students permission to choose their own mentors in the second year that I ran a peer mentor program, not everyone was able to pair with a friend, or even with someone who they had talked to outside of the classroom. One student, for example, was new to the school and so she formed



a mentor partnership with a student she did not know at all. Another pair was formed by default. As neither student was especially friendly with anyone else in the class, I suggested they form a peer mentor pair. Again, logistical considerations prevailed and, as a result, some peer mentor pairs struggled to work effectively. For example, after their initial negotiation session about their priorities for their peer mentor relationship, one student, Kathleen, commented, “I think both Paul and I were a little bit uncomfortable when we talked, as we had never spoken to each other before we were thrown together” (Learning Log: 15.2.01). This lack of familiarity and uneasiness with one another did not really improve in the months that Kathleen and Paul remained peer mentors. Reflecting on their peer mentor relationship after it had concluded, Kathleen made the following comment:

I got a bad peer mentor. With me and Paul it was uncomfortable. I reckon small peer groups would be better than twos, which can be awkward. It's good to have a variety of people because that way you can get a wide range of opinions.... I'd prefer the group idea to a partner (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

Kathleen's reference to Paul as “a bad peer mentor” is more a comment about their lack of familiarity with one another, than a comment about Paul himself. It is an observation about the fact that their mentor relationship was inadequate due to the awkward dynamic between them.

In response to Naomi's comments in the focus group interview about her friendship with her peer mentor, Tanya, making it easy for them to talk to one another, another student, Jane, expressed negative feelings about her peer mentor relationship:

**Jane:** I didn't feel comfortable saying anything to my peer mentor.

**Naomi:** Yeah, but that's because you weren't specifically great friends.

**Jane:** Well because we didn't like each other at all.

**Me:** So do you think the level of, sort of, closeness or friendship actually really makes a difference?

**Naomi:** It does.

**Jane:** I'm not trying to be really blunt or horrible but the fact that I don't like her and didn't want to speak to her anyway made me not want to speak to her about things like learning. Do you know what I mean?... Even though my friends might not be the most intelligent people in the world, I would rather have gone to them and said, you know, "Can you help me with this?", than have gone to my peer mentor, and I think that was what the problem was (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

When I reflected on Jane's comments in this excerpt, the importance of peer mentors feeling comfortable with each other and, perhaps even more fundamentally, liking each other, seemed so obvious. I have learnt from the feedback that my students provided that where a positive dynamic between peer mentors does not exist, the benefits of the relationship are significantly diminished, if not completely eroded. When initiating peer mentor combinations with my students, I now expressly encourage them to form combinations with which they feel comfortable, even if this means sacrificing logistical or pragmatic considerations. This sometimes means allowing peer mentor trios or even groups of four to replace peer mentor pairs. Nevertheless, I have also come to discover that, for good reasons, it is not always possible to "get it right" in relation to the compatibility of peer mentor combinations. Some students, for example, only discover their incompatibility as they embark on their peer mentor relationship. As a result of my experiences, I firmly believe that peer mentoring has the potential to foster transformative learning in students, but like all sound pedagogical practices, it is not foolproof and there will be failures as well as success stories.

## **5.8 Degrees of Involvement and the Tyranny of Time**

Just as the degree to which students felt comfortable with one another differed from one peer mentor combination to the next, so the degree to which students capitalised upon the peer mentor program varied. I allocated class periods for students to spend time with their peer mentors, but the demands of the English course prescribed for study often meant that I did not make as many periods

available to students for this purpose as I would have liked. Indeed, one of the recurring frustrations expressed by students was that they were not given enough time to spend with their peer mentors. Colin, for example, made the following comment in his learning log:

The mentoring process appears to be really helpful, in regard to brainstorming ideas and using your mentor as a kind of sounding board to express what you're trying to say, but I think in order for it to be really beneficial, it would need to involve a set amount of time weekly to be set aside (Learning Log: 31.3.01).

Rochelle expressed a similar view in her Reflection Statement at the end of the first year of the peer mentor program:

The only negative thing that I have to say about the peer mentoring system is that it didn't happen often enough. I thought we would meet more often, but due to other work that needed to be done, this was not the case. I thought that this was a bit disappointing, but other than that, the process generally worked well (Reflection Statement: 15.9.00).

Making time for the peer mentor program was not easy. Nevertheless, having witnessed the benefits of the program, I can see the value of allocating specific class periods for students to spend time with their mentors. Having said this, some students craved more time with their peer mentor than others. After their initial negotiation session, Anthony indicated in his learning log that he and his mentor, Roger, did not intend to talk much with each other about their work:

I think that the consensus we have reached is one in favour of mentoring by correspondence. So, instead of us as mentors being involved in the creative/critical process of thought, we will simply act as a final filter or sounding board. This is mainly due to the fact that Roger and I are fiercely independent learners. I don't believe that either of us would benefit from help from each other (except where one is perhaps stuck or not understanding something or just plain lazy) as we are beginning a composition. However I know that I am lost without a reader to make comments about stuff (Learning Log: 18.3.01).

At the end of the first year of the peer mentor program, I asked students to write a Peer Mentor Review. In this review, they were asked to comment on their perceptions of their peer mentor's Major Work and, more importantly, on what

impact they believed the self-directed learning task had made on their peer mentor. In her Peer Mentor Review of Donna, Carmel made the following observations:

I think the times Donna and I spent talking about the real Tully [the central protagonist in the novel *Tully*, by Paullina Simons, a text about which Donna wrote in her Major Work] and the emotional trauma that she endured due to her mother's abuse [also] provided breakthroughs for Donna. She benefited most from discussions and opportunities to share ideas and receive feedback. I was constantly amazed by her insight and sensitivity....

I think that as a result of completing such an enormous task, Donna has gained confidence and has grown as a person. I think she has discovered that who we are is greatly influenced by who we were as children and by our upbringings (Peer Mentor Review: 18.9.00).

Here we see a very different focus in the peer mentor relationship than the focus decided upon by Anthony and Roger. Time just talking with her peer mentor led to Donna's generation of ideas. The style of conversation between Carmel and Donna could best be described as discursive, and through this dialogue, Donna crystallised her ideas. In this entry, Carmel also articulates the ways in which she believes the whole project transformed Donna, highlighting Donna's growth in confidence and, more generally, her growth as a person. From observing the learning process for Donna, I am convinced that her transformation was significantly facilitated by the opportunity to talk through her thoughts and feelings with her peer mentor, Carmel.

## **5.9 Mutually Supportive Peer Relationships: A Key Dimension of Transformative Learning**

The peer mentor program that I established emerged from a belief that peer support would be valuable to my students. As I reflected on students' comments about the program, the transformative benefits of the program emerged. Firstly, in acting as mentors, many students grew in their skills of critical reflection. When confronted with the difficulties of their peers, they had to discover ways of

helping them, by being a sounding board, by being an empathic listener, and by offering possible ways forward. Throughout this process students frequently reflected upon their own work and, as a result, their capacity for self-reflection also grew. The capacity for critical reflection and self-reflection are recognised as being of seminal importance in the transformative learning process. Peer mentoring can therefore be seen as an important dimension in a pedagogical approach designed to foster transformation. Having a mentor provided the necessary affective support that students felt they needed as they were pushed outside their comfort zones. My students expressed that the support of a respected peer gave them the courage to traverse new territory and, in some instances, this proved to be transformative for them. Mentors also functioned as a sounding board for some students and, as such, mentees experienced a range of new perspectives that often made an impact on them. The quality of relationships that occurred in the mentor partnerships varied from one pair to the next, but were most effective when students were friends and respected the mutual contributions that the relationship afforded them. In many instances, peer mentor relationships complemented the dialogic approach to learning in the classroom, providing students with the opportunity to both gain support from a peer and to develop their own reflective and metacognitive skills in their quest to help another. In the following chapter, I explore the role of critical reflection and self-reflection, both of which may be developed through peer mentor relationships, in more detail.

## Chapter 6

# Critical Reflection and Reflective Writing: Key Dimensions of Transformative Learning

*There are a thousand thoughts lying within a man that he does not know till he takes up the pen to write.*

William Makepeace Thackeray

### 6.1 Critical Reflection

The dialogic approach to pedagogy explored in the previous two chapters rests on the belief that transformative learning occurs when people are exposed to the views of others and when they are challenged to consider their own frames of reference in the light of these alternative views. At its very essence, transformative learning is about responding to new circumstances and insights in ways that change the self, so that it is more integrated and authentic. This process of transformation is driven, in part, by critical reflection. Like the crystals falling, criss-crossing and landing inside a kaleidoscope, our lives are constantly changing before our eyes. New ways of seeing the world and of seeing ourselves become evident as time passes and conditions change, but it is only through critical reflection on these changes, through allowing them to penetrate the consciousness to the point where they impact on future action, that transformation occurs.

Dewey (1933) coined the term “critical thinking” and its synonym “reflective thinking”, defining his concept as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Mezirow (1991) stresses that “not every act of introspection (becoming aware of thoughts or feelings) is reflective” (p. 101) but that reflection “is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience”(p. 104). It “involves a review of the way we have consciously, coherently, and purposefully applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each phase of solving a problem” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 101). Mezirow (1991)

emphasises the importance of reflection in the learning process, arguing that “our continued learning becomes dependent upon a reflective review of what we have learned, how we have learned it, and whether our presuppositions are warranted” (p. 109).

As an educator, the challenge for me has been to consider ways of fostering critical reflection in my students, in order that they might be open to new possible ways of seeing themselves, others and the world. Cranton (1994) cautions that “when educators leave learners’ critical reflection to chance, they deny some of their responsibilities as educators” (p. 166). Mezirow (1990), too, highlights the importance of the educator in fostering critical reflection in learners:

Emancipatory education is an organized effort to help the learner challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of understanding, and act on new perspectives (p. 18).

My attempts to foster critical reflection in the students that are the focus of this study stemmed from a belief that it might help them to discover and acknowledge their *own* thoughts and feelings, as a precursor to shaping their future thoughts, feelings and actions. Critical reflection is, at heart, emancipatory and creative, because no one else can dictate the terms upon which it takes place, or determine its outcomes.

## **6.2 Self-Reflection and Creativity**

Mooney (1956), in his exploration of what makes a creative person, highlights the importance of self-reflection in the process of shaping and transforming one’s identity:

The creative person seeks to extend his experiencing through holding himself open for increasing inclusions. This is evidenced by an inclination to take life as an adventure and a becoming, a curiosity and willingness to understand what is going on in oneself and in related aspects of the environment, a desire to get out to the edges of conscious realization and to feel a way into the unknown, an interest in new ideas and fresh perspective, a spirit of play and experimentation.

The creative person seeks to focus his experiencing through self-differentiation and self-realization. This is evidenced by a willingness to be different in things that make a difference, an honoring of his own fulfillment even when it runs counter to common expectations of others, a persistent inquiry into the meaning of his own life, a feeling that his individual life has independent roots, an insistence on expression for self-clarification, a feeling that the world is, in important part, his own creation (pp. 264-265).

At the heart of transformation of the self lies creativity. Whenever we critically self-reflect and then decide to change in some way, we are shaping or creating our identity. Self-reflection causes us to grow aware of our ever-changing state and to break free from the restrictions caused by defining ourselves in fixed ways, as if we were static, rather than dynamic beings.

In discussing the patterns emerging from the clients with whom he had had a therapeutic relationship, Carl Rogers (1956) identifies a single prevailing issue:

It seems to me that at bottom each person is asking: "Who am I, really? How can I get in touch with this real self, underlying all my surface behavior? How can I become myself?" (p. 196).

He goes on to describe the type of atmosphere he tries to create for clients in therapy sessions emphasising, in particular, "an atmosphere of freedom in which he can move in his thinking and feeling and being, in any direction he desires" (Rogers, 1956, p. 196). Rogers (1956) argues that in this environment, clients become more themselves. The client "begins to drop the false fronts, or the masks, or the roles, with which he has faced life. He appears to be trying to discover something more basic, something more truly himself" (p. 196).

Moustakas (1956) puts it this way:

The individual is engaged in leading his life in the present, with a forward thrust in the future. This is the concept of becoming, with its implications of change and transformation. Creation is conceived as a continued transition from one form to another. The world, while it is being perceived, is being incessantly created by an individual who is a process, not a product. The individual is not a fixed entity but a center of experience involving the creative



synthesis of relations. The central force for this becoming nature of man is a basic striving within the human being to assert and expand his self-determination, to create his own fate (pp. 272-273).

## **6.3 Reflective Journal Writing**

### **6.3.1 The Value of Journal Writing**

In an attempt to foster this type of creative critical reflection in my students, I asked them to keep learning logs (or reflective journals) to explore their thoughts and feelings about the learning process, and indeed to function as an active dimension of the learning process itself. They could use their logs to jot down tentative ideas, to record suggestions made by their peer mentors, to express their frustrations and their breakthroughs in the learning process, and as a means of communicating with me. In this chapter, I explore the nature of critical reflection and reflective writing in order to reveal the possible ways in which these processes may shed light on the nature of transformative learning.

The benefits of reflective journal writing have been explored by researchers and by educators interested in promoting transformative learning in adults. Their ideas are, I would argue, equally relevant for educators interested in promoting reflective thinking in high school students. Lukinsky (1990) suggests, “Keeping a journal may help adults break habitual modes of thinking and change life direction through reflective withdrawal and reentry” (p. 213). He goes on to stress the importance for the individual of the writing process in the generation of meaning:

The “new” journal, then, is a tool for connecting thought, feeling, and action – a synthesizing tool that works from the inside out and from the outside in. Implied in this is a critique of spirituality unconnected to daily life; reflection and action have to be brought together to see in a new light. When these are brought together, we can draw upon our resources without need of experts. (Lukinsky, 1990, p. 214).

One of the major proponents of journal writing, Progoff (1973a, 1973b, 1975, 1980, 1983), was strongly influenced by Jung and Suzuki in his workshopping and writing. Progoff insisted that journal writing be connected to life, and in his

development of the *intensive journal*, demonstrated that he was committed to honouring both the rational, logical left brain and the intuitive, emotive right brain (Ranier, 1978, p. 65). The intensive journal process adumbrated by Progoff has a range of functions:

Active journal writing jogs the memory, brings lost potentials to the surface, and instigates retrievals. In the act of writing, connections and integrations occur to the writer; as the writing unfolds, new thoughts emerge and are written down (Lukinsky, 1990, p. 219).

Since one of the primary purposes of journal writing is to enable students to experience freedom – to write what they feel and to feel what they write – when introducing the idea of keeping a journal, I felt it was important to encourage students to write in their own style, without fear of reproach. Fulwiler (1987) recognises that “leading language scholars”, including Vygotsky and others, “have argued, variously but persuasively, that human beings find meaning in the world by exploring it through language – their own easy talky language, not the language of textbook and teacher” (p. 1). Because I intended to read my students’ learning logs, I made it clear to them that their logs would in no way be evaluated or judged in terms of technical considerations, such as the use of grammar, spelling, or logical structuring of ideas. I stressed that the logs were intended to help them to reflect upon their own learning, and that I would be reading them in order to discover ways in which I could better support their learning. Cranton (1994) draws attention to the importance of the teacher and his or her students establishing a clear understanding of the function of reflective journal writing:

Two aspects of journal writing can inhibit its potential to stimulate transformative learning; first is the learner’s perception of the educator role and any position power imbalance that implies.... Second, the purpose or goal of journal writing should be discussed openly among learners and educators. If this goal is not agreed upon and understood by all participants, critical self-reflection will take place only by chance (p. 180).

When I introduced the idea of keeping learning logs to my Year 11 students, I provided them with some written guidelines that we subsequently discussed in class. The written guidelines are reproduced below:

## **Learning Logs**

Throughout this year, you will be required to keep a learning log. This log is simply a series of personal reflections on your learning bound together in a loose leaf folder. These entries are intended to help you to reflect upon yourself as a learner.

I would like these logs to be distinctly individual and for you to feel free to be totally honest and to express your own voice in the log. Obviously, I will be reading your entries, so they are not entirely private. The logs will also provide me with an opportunity to tune in to your feelings about the course and you as a learner.

I will not specify when you are to write an entry but it will be up to you to schedule time to write in your log twice a week. Some of you may also like to include diagrams or pictures that represent your ideas. This is your log, so make it your own in whatever ways you think are appropriate.

The examples that follow are either taken from students' learning logs themselves, or from focus group interviews in the course of which students made comments about the value of writing in their learning logs. Through examining and analysing both students' comments about engaging in reflective writing and actual examples of their reflective writing, a greater understanding of the ways in which it may foster transformative learning emerged for me.

### **6.3.2 Journal Writing, Metacognition and Transformative Learning**

Based on the experiences of students in her literature classes, for whom keeping a journal was a central feature of the course, Dickerson (1987) found significant "evidence of a rigorous examination and evaluation of the self that takes place during the writing process" (p. 129). Responses from my students revealed a similar finding. Joshua is an illuminating example. In response to the first question asked in the focus group interviews – Do you think you have changed or grown as a student of English and/or as a person since the beginning of last year? If so, in what ways? – Joshua commented on the value of reflective writing for him:

**Joshua:** Before learning with you for the last year and a bit, I never thought about how I changed as a learner. I always thought it was just a, um, process that was similar all the way through, just improving in the level of difficulty and learning the same way as I went through and um, so one way I've grown as a student is, um, thinking about how I do learn and how I have changed as a learner.

**Me:** What do you think has helped to promote you thinking about that?

**Joshua:** Learning logs.

**Me:** So, reflecting on your learning through writing about it?

**Joshua:** Yes (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

In this focus group interview, Joshua acknowledges that through writing about the learning process he actually became more consciously aware of it. It seems to have dawned on him that learning is a dynamic phenomenon that is experienced uniquely by each individual. It is clear that Joshua not only experienced changes in the learning process, but also began to consider the implications of these changes for his future learning. This heightened degree of metacognition about learning seems to have been fostered through reflective writing and Joshua indicates that this was transformative for him: "one way I've grown as a student is, um, thinking about how I do learn and how I have changed as a learner." Joshua's heightened consciousness, developed through the process of writing, resulted in a revelation. It became clear to him that he had distinctive learning preferences, and that the ways in which he learnt best altered over time. Indeed, it could be argued that this heightened consciousness became a means by which Joshua was capable of transforming his patterns of learning. Damasio's (2000) insights into the nature of consciousness support Joshua's experience:

From its humble beginnings to its current estate, consciousness is a revelation of existence – a partial revelation, I must add. At some point in its development, with the help of memory, reasoning, and later, language, consciousness also becomes a means to modify existence (p. 315).

Joshua's learning log entries illustrate the growth in his metacognitive capacity, to which he implicitly refers in the focus group interview. The following learning

log entry of Joshua's, for example, demonstrates the outworkings of reflective writing in practice:

I think my writing has improved significantly, which I think I have learning-logged either this term or last. I still write sentences that don't make sense, my spelling is a nightmare (I love computers), my grammar still has some issues. I sometimes write things which I feel clearly express my point, yet on closer examination, I discover they are often written in poor English and make little to no sense. There are probably many examples of this in this term's learning logs. This inability to express myself clearly is probably my biggest problem. I need to focus on conveying complex ideas simply, elegantly and fully, rather than thinking I sound impressive by writing long, confusing sentences with many big words in them. I think this is a key.

An aspect that was surprising to me when we did the last major work was my ability to hear or read other students' work and to be able to offer some ideas. This process of thinking about other people's work (especially my peer mentor, Colin's) and commenting on it broadened my experience and made the whole project more enriching for me. I learnt from thinking about their work, as well as from thinking about my own (Learning Log: 26.5.01).

In this entry, and in others contained within Joshua's learning log, there is ample evidence of his heightened capacity for metacognition. I also noticed a shift from his rather pedestrian responses in class discussions, to more reflective, analytical responses. Importantly, there is a high degree of self-awareness evident in Joshua's learning log entries. They are full of evidence of his growing capacity for astute self-evaluation, which in turn resulted in changed patterns of behaviour.

In the above learning log entry, Joshua voices what he perceives to be both his weaknesses and emerging strengths as a learner. He identifies that his "writing has improved significantly", but at the same time identifies key areas of his writing that need ongoing attention: "This inability to express myself clearly is probably my biggest problem." Joshua's close reflection on this dimension of his learning also resulted in his capacity to formulate a plan for ameliorating his weaknesses: "I need to focus on conveying complex ideas simply, elegantly and fully, rather than thinking I sound impressive by writing long, confusing sentences with many big words in them. I think this is a key." Joshua also identifies a previously

unrecognised strength when he comments on the satisfaction he derived from offering ideas to his fellow students. He refers to this discovery as “surprising”, and of helping others with their work as both “enriching” and as having “broadened [his] experience.” The fact that Joshua found his capacity to help others “surprising” shows that this was a new dimension of learning for him. The development in his metacognitive skills through the process of reflective writing may well have contributed to his growing capacity to reflect and comment upon the work of others. Joshua’s entry highlights the fact that critically reflective writing may be triggered by learning experienced in relationship with others. In Dewey’s (1933) words, “Only when relationships are held in view does learning become more than a miscellaneous scrap bag” (p.185).

## **6.4 The Interfusion of Feeling and Cognition in Transformative Self-Reflection**

In speaking about clients undergoing therapy, Rogers (1956) states:

In our daily lives there are a thousand and one reasons for not letting ourselves experience our attitudes fully, reasons from our past and from the present, reasons that reside within the social situation. It seems too dangerous, too potentially damaging, to experience them freely and fully. But in the safety and freedom of the therapeutic relationship they can be experienced fully, clear to the limit of what they are. They can be and are experienced in a fashion that I like to think of as a “pure culture”, so that for the moment the person is his fear, or he is his anger, or he is his tenderness, or whatever (p. 199).

He goes on to argue that as people openly experience their feelings, they become what they are:

When a person has, throughout therapy, experienced in this fashion all the emotions which organismically arise in him, and has experienced them in this knowing and open manner, then he has experienced himself, in all the richness that exists within himself. He has become what he is (Rogers, 1956, p. 201).

Here Rogers touches on the fact that without first discovering who we are at any moment in time, without becoming consciously self-aware, we cannot experience

perspective transformation. To argue this is to acknowledge the strongly affective dimensions of transformation, for transformation is rarely, if ever, a purely cognitive process, and what we are cannot be defined in simply cognitive terms. One of my students, Jane, revealed a considerable capacity for self-reflection as she confronted her attitude and performance in English at one point in Year 11. In the following entry taken from her learning log, she considers the previous term of English:

We got our marks back for the first term of English today. While I was incredibly disappointed, I think about it and I most probably deserved what I got. I do work hard, but obviously not hard enough. The thing with it is that my parents keep saying, "You have dropped back fifteen places. It's not good enough." While I can see that, I hate situations where they are disappointed. It's much easier to deal with when I'm the one who is disappointed, not them.

My approach to learning has been very different this year and it worries me a bit. The assessments that we've had, not just in English, but across the board, have been so difficult that instead of me saying, "I aim to get over eighty," I find myself saying, "I aim to pass" (Learning Log: 16.5.01).

Further reflection upon these issues was prompted by a parent-teacher interview at which Jane was present:

Well, what a total wake-up call! Last night was parent-teacher interviews and everything came out in the open. I think I've probably been lying to myself about how much work I've been doing. I just can't find it in me to be motivated to complete things. I'll go home and think to myself, "OK, I'm going to do things", and then I just don't do them. It's really frustrating and I'm worried I'll be like this next year as well – when it really counts.

I think this year so far has been a lesson – that I definitely won't forget – that I can use to help me next year. I now know that I have to be motivated to do things or else they are never going to get done. I also have to stop making excuses to myself and to everyone else. There is no reason why I shouldn't be able to get everything done.

In a way, I suppose the fact that I have recognised all these problems, and have started working out ways to fix them, really is a facet of independent learning. For example, I was pleased that I

was able to recognise that my independent critical major work was a really poor effort. This motivated me to redo it, even though the first version had already been marked and that mark wouldn't change (Learning Log: 6.6.01).

In these entries, Jane clearly experiences a perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) argues that perspective transformation “involves a sequence of learning activities that begins with a disorienting dilemma and concludes with a changed self-concept that enables a reintegration into one's life context on the basis of conditions dictated by a new perspective” (p. 193). In this case, the parent-teacher interview and her assessment results were disorienting dilemmas for Jane. Recognition of problems, followed by her attempt to “begin working out ways to fix them”, evidenced in her action of redoing one of her Major Works, demonstrated a “reintegration into [her] life context on the basis of conditions dictated by a new perspective” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 193).

Perhaps the most striking feature of these learning log entries is that they demonstrate Jane's understanding of her approach to learning and her growing awareness that she has not been entirely honest with herself. Through the writing process, an emerging sense of the truth of her situation and of the need to change became clear to Jane: “I think I've probably been lying to myself about how much work I've been doing.... I think this year so far has been a lesson – that I definitely won't forget – that I can use to help me next year.” Her learning is experiential, moving through various stages to a point where changes in behaviour are foreshadowed in her writing. Kerka (1996) draws attention to the fact that others have detected this pattern in the composition of journal entries:

Journal entries can provide tangible evidence of mental processes. They make thoughts visible and concrete, giving a way to interact with, elaborate on, and expand ideas. Clark (1994) and Grennan (1989) explain how journal entries demonstrate movement through Kolb's modes of experiential learning: recording a concrete experience or feeling, reflecting on and observing the experience, integrating the observation into abstract concepts or theories, and using the theories to make decisions and solve problems (p. 3).



There is no doubt that Jane's reflections are critically self-reflective of assumptions that she held. In this sense, they call into question Mezirow's (1998) perspective that critical reflection of assumptions "and particularly its variant, becoming critically self-reflective of assumptions, are distinctly *adult* dimensions of critical reflection and of reason assessment" (p. 187). Indeed, many of the students' reflections quoted in this and other chapters call into question the view that adolescents are incapable of critical self-reflection. They may need to be encouraged to practise the skill of reflective writing, and they may not find it easy, but this study reveals that it *is* possible for high school students to engage in critical self-reflection that may lead to transformative learning.

The interfusion of emotional and cognitive dimensions in Jane's reflections is also striking. The log entries transparently reveal Jane's perception that she needs to change. As she writes about this perception, her pain is evident and in this sense the entries also reflect her vulnerability. Jane's metacognitive capacities are evident in that she acknowledges that her recognition of her "problems" and her proactive approach to solving them are positive signs that she is growing in her capacity to learn independently. There is clear evidence of transformation here. To illustrate this, Jane cites the example of her decision to re-write a major assignment because she felt her original attempt was not of a satisfactory standard. These mature perceptions of the ways in which she needs to grow and change are also interfused with descriptions of the emotional dimensions that such a process involves. This is especially evident when Jane expresses feeling "incredibly disappointed" with her exam results and with her parents' reaction to these results: "I hate situations where they are disappointed." Jane also indicates that she feels "worried" about her approach to learning and frustrated that in spite of her intellectual awareness that it would be good to change, for a period she felt unmotivated to do so. Through allowing these feelings to rise to the surface through writing about them, Jane was then able to move forward. The interfusion of Jane's thoughts and feelings may be better understood in the light of Damasio's (2000) neurological research into the connections between the body, emotion and the making of consciousness, in which he argues that consciousness itself may in fact be a feeling:

The idea of consciousness as a feeling of knowing is consistent with the important fact I adduced regarding the brain structures most closely related to consciousness: such structures, from those that support the proto-self to those that support second-order mappings, process body signals of one sort or another, from those in the internal milieu to those in the musculoskeletal frame. All of those structures operate within the nonverbal vocabulary of feelings. It is thus plausible that the neural patterns which arise from activity in those structures are the basis for the sort of mental images we call feelings. The secret of making consciousness may well be this: that the plotting of a relationship between any object and the organism becomes the feeling of a feeling. The mysterious first-person perspective of consciousness consists of newly-minted knowledge, information if you will, expressed as feeling (p. 313).

Since our “first-person perspective of consciousness” is expressed as a feeling, the neat dichotomy between thought and feeling would seem problematic. Of course, we *talk* in terms of what we think and what we feel, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that we feel our thoughts and think about our feelings in a way that makes the distinction rather arbitrary. I would therefore argue that critical reflection that allows feelings to rise to the surface, and reflective writing, through which these surfacing feelings often take shape, are integral dimensions of the transformative learning process. Heightened consciousness provides many benefits and is often crucial to the transformative learning process but, as Damasio (2000) highlights, there is also a flip side:

Of course, consciousness and its revelations allow us to create a better life for self and others, but the price we pay for that better life is high. It is not just the price of risk and danger and pain. Worse even: it is the price of knowing what pleasure is and knowing when it is missing or unattainable (p. 316).

Nevertheless, despite the fact that critical reflection, and especially critical *self*-reflection of assumptions, may cause a sense of disequilibrium and even pain, it is this very process that opens the way for transformation. As Moustakas (1956) states, “While adjustment and stabilization are perhaps good because they cut pain, they are also bad because development toward higher ideals, ordering, and creation ceases” (p. 279).

## 6.5 Critical Thinking and Reflective Writing: A Close Nexus

The close nexus between thought and language is not a new concept. Vygotsky (1962) highlights the folly of viewing thought and verbal or written language as entirely separate entities when he states:

The relation between thought and word is a living process; thought is born through words. A word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow. The connection between them, however, is not a preformed and constant one. It emerges in the course of development, and itself evolves (p. 153).

There has also been a growing awareness amongst theorists that critical thinking is not merely *evident in* writing, but is *fostered through* writing. As Capossela (1992) states:

Critical thinking theorists are coming to recognize that writing both demonstrates and fosters critical thinking. Nickerson et al. in a book devoted to teaching thinking, recommend a close examination of writing pedagogy because “writing is so paradigmatic a case of thinking” (247). They point out that “to teach people to write better is to teach them to think better,” and that methods which help students write better should be incorporated into courses aimed at improving their thinking skills (247). (p. 4).

Comments made by my students reveal some significant insights into the connections between critical thinking and reflective writing. In her learning log, one of my students, Kathleen, wrote about the process of writing reflectively as she undertook one of her self-directed Major Works:

These learning logs have been really beneficial for me. While they weren't a place where I recorded a lot of notes for my major work, they provided a place for me to reflect on the process of writing the major work. By having to write down my progress, I thought about it a lot more, and sometimes while mulling through my thoughts over my desk, a new idea, angle or parallel would hit me. Furthermore, I guess that the learning logs have also been a means for me to blow off any stress or anguish. You may have noticed that not all my log entries were particularly positive! So for me, the learning logs have been an important part of the whole independent learning process (Learning Log: 11.5.01).

The notion of reflective writing promoting thought is clearly evident in this entry. Firstly, Kathleen acknowledges that the process of writing about her learning meant that she “thought about it a lot more.” It is easy for students to view learning as merely a series of tasks that an external force (teacher; examination board; parents) requires them to complete. Because the motivation for such learning is generated from outside the student, the process, by its very nature, is unlikely to be transformative. Through reflective writing, students like Kathleen begin to consider learning as a phenomenon that is personal and unique to them. It is not something imposed upon them from outside, but something that happens within. A reflective spiral may then emerge: as students reflect on their learning, they begin to change, and these changes in turn prompt further reflection that may result in other changes.

Kathleen also indicates that in the process of writing, new thoughts were generated: “...sometimes while mulling through my thoughts over my desk, a new idea, angle or parallel would hit me.” Lukinsky’s (1990) explanation of this phenomenon experienced by Kathleen is illuminating:

Meaning is emergent, kinesthetically felt in the course of writing. The writing, more than a means to an end, generates momentum and is, in a deeper sense, the meaning. Something happens now, as opposed to recording what has happened, and the journal becomes an objectification of the inner search, an anchor from which to make further explorations (p. 213).

The generation of meaning through writing was experienced by another one of my students, Ashley. In response to Question 2 in the focus group interview – What is it about the way you have studied English over the past year and a bit that has changed the way you perceive yourself as a learner and/or as a person? – Ashley made the following comments:

I thought the journalling was really effective for me, um, especially just um, being able to put everything down and it was often while writing over that that new ideas would come to me because to write it down you have to think more logically, so it just forced me to think about my ideas a bit more. In *The Crucible* assignment, there was a lot of opportunity to gather my

ideas by reading back over my journal entries. (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

Here Ashley highlights the fact that the writing process “forced [him] to think about [his] ideas a bit more.” In claiming this, he implies that writing, in externalising his thought, gave it greater clarity, because “to write it down you have to think more logically.” Here Ashley seems to be touching on an interesting dimension of the process of critical thinking: thoughts and feelings need to be externalised (in written form or in dialogue with others), in order to re-enter the consciousness with greater clarity, before they are externalised once again in a more defined and refined form. This phenomenon is captured by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1945) when she describes the thought process of her narrator (based on herself) as she sits on the bank of a river:

Thought – to call it by a prouder name than it deserved – had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating....

But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind – put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still (p. 7).

Woolf's image of embryonic thought as a fish pulled out of the water and laid out on the river bank is, I think, a helpful one, for it highlights the phenomenon that after the “careful laying of it out”, it is ready for growth within the mind. The process of externalising thought generates a capacity for it to expand and multiply when it is once again internalised. Although Woolf's narrator is alone on the bank of the river, I would argue that her picture of the examination of externalised thought could well apply to the context of discussion of thought in dialogue with another person, or to the act of reflective writing. These are forms of externalisation that help to crystallise thought and to generate further thoughts,

particularly if the thought looks “insignificant” to the person owning it. Having been externalised, the thought, “put back into the mind” (or at least considered again in a fresh way), can become “exciting”, “important” and can generate “a wash and tumult of ideas”, to use Woolf’s description.

Dialogue with others can stimulate productive self-reflection. Critically reflective writing can fulfil a similar function. Thought is generated as students write, sometimes without them even being aware of it. In the focus group interview of which she was a part, another student, Sandra, in response to Question 5 – Can you trace for me the journey of one of your independent Major Works done in this class last year? – made the following comments:

I was totally lost with my topic. I found it difficult to choose my own topic and once I had it, I thought, “I don’t know where I’m going to start.” But especially through doing the learning logs every week, I found if I kept writing on my topic, by the time I got to the stage where I actually had to write, I had a look back on my learning logs and I realised how much I actually had to say on the topic.... My learning logs were the basis for what I did [in the final piece of work]. For the next piece of work, I started earlier and then I had time for a lot of editing. I learnt that this would be a good idea from the previous piece of work, because I was always saying in my learning logs, “I wish I had started earlier.” (Focus Group Interview: 5.2.02).

In this entry, Sandra expresses the pragmatic value of having a written record of her ideas: “But especially through doing the learning logs every week, I found if I kept writing on my topic, by the time I got to the stage where I actually had to write, I had a look back on my learning logs and I realised how much I actually had to say on the topic.” On a deeper level, looking back on previous log entries functioned as a trigger to metacognitive thought that transformed habitual patterns of learning (such as leaving work until very close to the due date) with which Sandra was not happy. In particular, writing about the learning process, and then reflecting upon this writing, promoted a change in Sandra’s time management: “For the next piece of work, I started earlier and then I had time for a lot of editing. I learnt that this would be a good idea from the previous piece of work, because I was always saying in my learning logs, ‘I wish I had started earlier.’”. Sandra’s comments vindicate Berthoff’s (1987) view “that thinking is a dialogue

we have with ourselves; that dialectic is an audit of meaning – a continuing effort to review the meanings we are making in order to see further what they mean” (p. 12). In a similar vein, Mezirow’s (1991) analysis supports Sandra’s experience: “Through reflection we *see through* the habitual way that we have interpreted the experience of everyday life in order to reassess rationally the implicit claim of validity made by a previously unquestioned meaning scheme or perspective” (p. 102).

## 6.6 Critically Reflective Writing: The Difficulties

Not all my students found the process of reflective writing easy, as the following excerpt from one of the focus group interviews shows:

**Jane:** I don’t like learning logs. I just feel really contrived.... I like journals where I can write, “I did this today and I got this information.”

**James:** I prefer writing about other things than writing about myself...

[Later]

**David:** I just find it weird having to think about how I’m thinking.... I really don’t think I’m a very reflective type of person.

**Jane:** David’s a Maths boy.

**David:** It’s just not my cup of tea really.

[Later]

**Jane:** I think it is a personality thing (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

This excerpt illustrates that for some, reflective writing feels “weird”, “contrived” or uncomfortable. This is not surprising. A high level of vulnerability is required as students engage in the process of writing reflectively and then sharing these reflections. Inkster (1992) stresses the importance of teachers acknowledging this vulnerability:

We need to acknowledge to ourselves and to our students that personal writing is difficult and dangerous stuff, not deprecate it as the easy stuff. We need to give our students permission to be fearful of this hazardous commitment – and at the same time encourage them (in the radical, literal sense of the word) to take the risk of asserting their integrity as an individual center of coherence and rationality, personally responsible for mediating and making sense of their world – of empirical facts on the one hand and social constructs on the other hand (p. 9).

Based on my reading of their learning logs, David and James *did* find it difficult to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the learning process. By contrast, although Jane indicates in this focus group interview that she doesn't like learning logs because they "feel really contrived", and although she states that she prefers to simply document the more prosaic nuts and bolts of the learning process, her log entries, analysed earlier in this chapter, reveal a high level of critical self-reflection. I suspect that Jane embarked on reflective writing feeling that it was "contrived", but as her log writing gained momentum, she found the process both cathartic and helpful in transforming entrenched views and patterns of behaviour. Still, it is interesting to note the fact that whilst reflective thinking and writing were clearly an integral part of the transformative learning process for Jane, she nevertheless expressed the view that she didn't enjoy the process of writing reflectively. Whilst David, James and Jane found reflective writing uncomfortable, for Kathleen it became an indispensable practice because of the benefits she perceived she derived from the process. After one of her English examinations, Kathleen wrote the following in her learning log:

Although we were told we don't have to write log entries for the weeks of our exams, I thought it would be beneficial for me to write something about how I think I went in the English exam on Wednesday (Learning Log: 21.11.01).

It is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about why some students, like Kathleen, find reflective writing enormously beneficial, whilst others, like David and James, find it "weird" or "contrived." There is certainly no sense in which the gender stereotype of girls being more reflective than boys provides an explanation. (Joshua and Ashley found reflective writing just as beneficial as



Kathleen). Perhaps Jane's comment comes closest to the mark: "I think it is a personality thing."

## 6.7 Dialogue Journals and the Importance of Empathy

Whilst reflective writing is a solitary activity, I have nevertheless found it useful to view students' reflections on their own learning as a starting point for ongoing dialogue with them about their learning. In doing so, I have sought to stimulate further critical reflection in them. Cranton (1994) refers to this type of journal as "a dialogue journal" (p. 180), and in her description of the type of feedback that teachers should offer, she highlights the importance of empathy:

Responses to the journal should be challenging but not judgmental and provocative but not condescending. Comments should never contradict how the learner sees himself or herself but should question the origin of those perceptions and the consequences of holding them (p. 181).

Although reflective discourse of the type espoused in the context of Transformation Theory is generally verbal (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 10-16), the challenges inherent in such discourse may also be realised in written form. One clear advantage of written dialogue includes being able to take the time to reflect before responding to the views of the writer. In the focus group interviews that I conducted, students testified to the dialogic dimension of writing learning log entries to which I responded in written form:

**Tanya:** It's good to know that you care if we like what we're doing or not, like it's really encouraging to know that you're interested in whether we're enjoying what we're doing, or whether that we just think it's, it's good like er teacher-student communication.

**Jane:** It's our way of speaking to you.

**Natalie:** Yeah, without it being as confronting as coming up to you and saying, "We don't like this..." (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

In another focus group interview, the following exchange took place:

**Kathleen:** I thought journalling was stress relief almost. I mean, the ones that we did last year, in them I made a couple of criticisms, about the peer mentoring program and stuff, and so it was a form of dialogue with you and I could say things that I felt were almost too weird to talk about in person.

**Roger:** Sometimes it's easier to put things down on paper and to think it up rationally in an ordered fashion. It might be difficult to do that in person.

**Kathleen:** Yeah, you can get it all out without the other person interrupting (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02).

These comments, made in two of the focus groups, highlight students' perceptions that this form of written dialogue was valuable to them. Tanya comments on being encouraged by my interest in whether or not the students in the class were enjoying the learning process. Naomi, Kathleen and Roger comment on written dialogue with me as being a less confronting mode of communication for them, in certain situations, than verbal communication. Kathleen says she valued it because it provided a channel for the expression of criticisms about aspects of the learning process. Indeed, as students became comfortable writing in their logs, many used them to vent their frustrations with school life in general, or specific aspects of the English course in particular. I would argue that all of these dimensions reflect an atmosphere of trust that is a prerequisite for honest dialogue. I sought to encourage honest critical reflection in my students through responding to their comments in a non-judgemental manner and with empathy. In turn, I hoped that my responses would foster further reflection in my students and, ultimately, that some students may experience transformation as a result.

The following learning log entries were written by the highest achiever in my Year 11 class. They were submitted two weeks apart, the first on the day that the student, Tanya, submitted an essay for marking, and the second soon after she had been given back the essay. They demonstrate the fact that her reflective journal was a place for Tanya to engage in critical self-reflection. Perhaps writing in her journal was even a way Tanya *discovered* her self-reflective voice. As I reflect afresh upon Tanya's written comments, I am once again moved by her vulnerability and impressed by her capacity for such extensive self-reflection. I

include here my response to Tanya's entries in order to provide an example of the dialogue journal in action. In the first of these two entries, Tanya wrote:

I handed in my essay today, which I had spent pretty much my whole last weekend working on. One problem I seem to have is my perfectionism, in that it sometimes inhibits my time management. While I feel that the essay I've done is good and I've learnt a lot from the writing of it, I know I've spent way too much time on it. Yet I can't seem to just write an essay – something inherent in my character means that I just have to make it the best essay I am capable of writing. This frustrates me, because I will spend so much time working on it, until I am completely satisfied, but really I could do less work and probably only lose a mark or two, for the extra hour or two. And whilst I know that the time I'm spending on it is disproportionate, I just can't bring myself to hand it in unless it's the best I can do (Learning Log: 21.3.01).

Two weeks later, after I had marked her essay and returned it to her, Tanya wrote:

I had my essay handed back the other day, and the mark was good...but if I'm honest with myself, I'm not happy with it. I don't really have any grounds to be disappointed, except that I set my standards so high. I don't even mean to, it's only that I realise it when something like this happens. It's my damn perfectionism which drives me to work so hard on something that I really give it my all. So if it's not the best – if I do the best I am capable of and it still isn't the best – then I am inclined to get dispirited.

But I know that's not right, that it's a bad attitude to have, so I was annoyed for a day and then I talked myself out of it and I'm now going to focus on doing the best journal article [the next piece of work due for English] I am capable of doing, even if it's not the best one that is handed in. It's a character flaw I need to deal with.

I still feel, though, that if I was going to get full marks for the essay, it would be worth all the extra time I spent on it, but I probably could have done significantly less work for 14/15, the mark I got. Or maybe I couldn't have; maybe I have misjudged it all...(Learning Log: 4.4.01).

In these log entries, Tanya is largely reflecting on her own personality and, in particular, on what she refers to as “an inherent character trait” of perfectionism which she believes “inhibits [her] time management.” Discussion of this character trait arose in the context of her reflections upon her reactions to being awarded

14/15 for an essay that she had spent quite some time on, rather than 15/15, the mark for which she was aiming. She also makes a telling comment when she reveals that she feels dispirited if her work is not perceived (by me) to be the best piece of work in the class.

After the second entry, I responded by writing Tanya the following letter:

Dear Tanya,

I want to talk to you

1. as a fellow learner/student
2. as your English teacher.

1. I can really empathise with your perfectionist streak. I always spent way too long on my English essays when I was at school and university. I was never happy, either, unless what I submitted was the absolute best I was capable of (causing me great angst in the process). This is a frustrating quality, but can I suggest it also has a positive dimension: it drives you to do your best and contributes to your success. Don't be too hard on yourself.

2. I was really impressed with the essay you submitted on *The Crucible* and only deducted one measly mark for the reasons I discussed with you. Hopefully my comments were constructive. You should be extremely proud of your achievement and I'm only sorry if my affirmation of your essay was not strong enough (although if you look back over my comments, I suspect you will not be able to avoid spotting much that is affirming). We can chat further about it if that would be helpful for you.

These learning log entries are fabulous – honest, open, self-reflective and perceptive. You are a fabulous English student – you have to trust me on that one! Keep up the great work! (5.4.01).

I do not know whether Tanya felt that my response was helpful (and that is what matters most). I do know that in composing my response, my intention was first to identify or empathise with her, and then to separate myself from her in an attempt to encourage her to continue to engage in critical self-reflection. In writing the letter I therefore positioned myself in two ways: as a “fellow learner/student” and as her English teacher.

In the first position, I sought to *identify* with her, not in any contrived sense, but because I genuinely understood, from my own experience, what it was like to experience perfectionist tendencies. As I responded to Tanya, I knew from my own experience that when others (especially teachers) had identified with similar feelings of mine in the past, I felt somehow comforted and reassured by the fact that my feelings were not unique. No one knew *exactly* what I felt, but others had expressed that they had a strong *sense* of how I felt, because they had been in similar situations, and this validated and empowered me. I hoped the same would be true for Tanya.

In the second position that I adopted in relation to Tanya, I sought not to identify but to stand back from her situation in an attempt to make a difference. In a sense, the standing back involved providing Tanya with another perspective on her situation. It was a perspective that I could offer her as her teacher, and as I offered this perspective I was someone “other” than her, not someone similar to her. I tried to convey to her in an affirming manner that her distress over “one measly mark” perhaps indicated that she was not focusing on the reasons why she had been awarded the other fourteen out of a possible fifteen marks. I also accepted some responsibility for this perspective (perhaps my affirmation of her had not been strong enough), even though my parenthetical comment – “although if you look back over my comments, I suspect you will not be able to avoid much that is affirming” – was intended to prompt Tanya to return to the feedback I gave her and to look with fresh eyes for a new perspective herself. I did not want to presume that this would be helpful for her, and so I also left the line of communication open: “We can chat further about it if that would be helpful for you.”

In one of his recent works, Damasio (2003) draws on the insights of Spinoza who proposed “that the power of affects is such that the only hope of overcoming a detrimental affect – an irrational passion – is by overpowering it with a stronger positive affect, one triggered by reason” (p. 11). Damasio (2003) goes on to say that at the heart of Spinoza’s thinking “was the notion that the subduing of the passions should be accomplished by reason-induced emotion and not by pure

reason alone” (p. 11). Feelings are not just peripheral states of being that may get in the way of reason, but are driving forces that are intimately connected to rational processes. The key here is the close connection between reason and emotion. I knew based on my own experience that any attempt by me to combat what Tanya was feeling with “pure reason alone” would have amounted to a failure to recognise the power of her emotions. Drawing on Damasio (2003), I have discovered the need to encourage students to develop positive affects (induced by reason) that overpower negative ones, rather than to engage in futile battles of mind over matter (or feeling). Encouraging them to reflect on the premises that undergird their thinking and feeling by engaging in reflective writing is one way of doing this.

Often my comments in the margins of students’ journals and at the conclusion of their entries were briefer than the response I made to Tanya in the letter quoted above. I tried, where appropriate, to raise questions designed to encourage students to reflect on their assumptions about themselves and the learning process. Approached conscientiously, dialogue journals are extremely time-consuming. There were weeks when the best I could manage were brief affirmations in the margins of students’ journals. When I had time, I wrote more extended responses. When I did not have time to respond in as much detail as I would have liked, I tried to remind myself that it was the process of reflective writing that was of central importance, and that even without detailed feedback, students were learning from the process.

## **6.8 Critical Reflection and Reflective Writing for the Teacher-Researcher**

Through becoming more critically self-reflective myself in the course of this research, I was better able to engage in dialogue with my students as *they* engaged in critical reflection and self-reflection. At the heart of hermeneutic phenomenological research lies the art of reflection. Teacher-researchers engaged in this type of research are engaged in deep, constant reflection, at the same time that they are encouraging their students to reflect. Van Manen (1997) states: “The

insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (p. 77). This process of interpreting meaning through reflection is not a passive occupation, but a creative act:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of “seeing” meaning (van Manen, 1997, p. 79).

A degree of *self*-reflection is integral to the process of interpreting the lived experience within a pedagogical context. Indeed, van Manen (1997) argues that

pedagogic reflection is a form of “self-reflectivity.” Self-reflection is the manner by which pedagogy tries to come to terms with self (the parent, the educator) and other (the child). In other words, self-reflection is the way in which pedagogy reflects on itself while serving other (p. 89).

Cole and Knowles (2000) comment on the value of reflective journal writing for the development of the teacher:

Ledoux (1993) compares the journal with the scientist’s laboratory – a place to experiment with ideas and methods. This is a liberating notion if you think of a laboratory as a creative place – a playground rather than a proving ground. If you allow yourself the physical, temporal, and psychological space to explore ideas and events in your teaching life; if you place yourself in your laboratory for some time each day to play with ideas and styles of recording, chances are you will come to appreciate and rely on the developmental value of journal writing (p. 54).

One of the frustrations I experienced throughout the period of my research was that I did not have more time to just scribble down all manner of thoughts about my teaching, and about the learning of my students, in journal form. The day to day pressures of working full time in a busy school, with all of the co-curricular demands and after hours work that this entailed, meant that it was difficult to find time for journalling. Thankfully, the phenomenological research in which I was engaged, with its emphasis on unearthing meaning through writing, meant that my

drafting and redrafting of sections of my thesis was a form of reflective writing that fulfilled many of the functions of journal writing. Indeed, the appeal to me of phenomenological research was the fact that my reflective writing, based on the feedback I received from students and on my own observations, continually honed my teaching practice, and my ongoing practice continued to shape my research. This praxis is perhaps the essence of being a teacher-researcher.

Reflective writing proved to be an important dimension of the transformative learning process for my students and for me. In the following chapter I explore the importance of writing, in the form of literary texts, in triggering reflective thought, and the value of writing about literature in the transformative learning process. I also explore my students' imaginative compositions in an attempt to discover signs of the types of thinking and feeling that are illustrative of transformative learning in action.



## Chapter 7

# Fostering Transformative Learning through the Study of Literature

*The best effect of any book is that it excites the reader to self activity.*

Thomas Carlyle

### 7.1 The Study of Literature: Its Transformative Potential

In the previous chapter, I explored the capacity for reflective writing to foster critical reflection and self-reflection that may, in turn, foster transformative learning in students. One dimension of the nature of transformative learning, therefore, is that it requires critical reflection and self-reflection and that these processes involve both cognitive and affective dimensions. Since this is the case, a teacher interested in transformative pedagogy may seek to foster critical reflection and self-reflection in students through encouraging students to engage in reflective writing. In this chapter I wish to build on the previous chapter by exploring the ways in which the study of literature may foster critical reflection and self-reflection and, in turn, may therefore promote transformative learning. The use of literary texts as catalysts for triggering critical reflection and transformative learning has received considerable attention (Frye, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978; Greene, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1995; Iser, 1980; Peim, 1993). Through examining my students' reflective comments about the ways in which their engagement with literature altered their perspectives, and through analysing specimens of their critical and creative compositions, I explore the ways in which my subject area, English, provides unique opportunities for transformative learning.

Van Manen (1982b), in answering the question, "What is the nature of the subject in the teaching experience?" states:

To be a teacher of history or literature may mean that I can tell many stories, or talk endlessly about poetry and the works of great poets. Evidently, to know a particular subject means that I

know something in this domain of human knowledge. But to know something does not mean to know just anything about something. To know something is to know what that something is in the way that it is and speaks to us (p. 295).

In this chapter, I explore the nature of literature “in the way that it is and speaks to us”. In doing so, I hope to reveal the ways in which the study of literature may promote transformative learning and also to explore approaches to the teaching of literature that might constitute transformative pedagogy.

## **7.2 Engaging With Literature: New Ways of Seeing**

Through becoming immersed in imaginary worlds (that nonetheless bear resemblance to the “real world”) students are exposed to new ways of seeing and, if they are sufficiently engaged in the reading process and sensitive to lived experience, this exposure may cause them to reflect on their own attitudes and perceptions. As Greene (1990) states, “We have come to recognize that aware engagements with literary art – that the use of imagination those engagements make possible – make a great deal happen in human consciousness” (p. 253).

Rosenblatt (1978) identifies two experiences that may occur when we engage with literary texts: an aesthetic transaction and an efferent transaction (pp. 22-47). An efferent reading is one in which “the primary concern of the reader is with what he will carry away from the reading” (p. 24). By contrast, the reader’s primary concern in aesthetic reading “is with what happens *during* the actual reading event” (p. 24). According to Rosenblatt, these experiences of reading are transactions, because the text is constructed between the reader and the text.

It is the aesthetic reading of texts that most closely defines the type of reading that might trigger students to reflect in such a way that they may experience transformation. According to Rosenblatt (1978), this type of reading involves “the actual moment-to-moment participation” in the world of a text so that, in the process of reading, the text becomes a literary work of art to the reader (p. 28). The text comes to exist for the reader as he or she brings his or her own experiences to bear on the world of a text. In Rosenblatt’s (1978) words:

What, after all, is the reader describing as he talks about a literary work of art? Has he not drawn on his own inner resources to create the experience designated as the poem or novel or play?... If a literary work of art is to ensue, the reader must turn his attention as fully as possible toward the transaction between himself and the text (p. 28).

In seeking to foster learning that is transformative for my students, I have been mindful of the fact that it is important for them to develop their own personal responses to literary texts and to be given freedom to consider the ways in which these texts might resonate with, or challenge, their own lived experience. Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Fish, 1980; Iser, 1980; Suleiman and Crossman, 1980) is based on this idea that reading a literary text is not about uncovering predefined meanings. Instead, this theory of criticism focuses on the view that an active reader will engage with a text and may find it to be personally meaningful for them in a way that another reader engaging with the same text may not. As Dornan, Rosen and Wilson (2003), in their description of reader response criticism, explain: "The reader must bring her own experiences and filters to bear on the text" (p. 157). Peim (1993) puts it this way: "Texts don't stand on their own as bearers of their own self-defining meanings. Any text is always read from a particular point of view, by a subject (or subjects) positioned at a particular point" (p. 73).

From this perspective, the reading process cannot be understood by focusing exclusively on either the text, or the reader, but by understanding the "dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction" (Iser, 1980, p. x). Iser (1980) goes on to explain: "It is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus" (Iser, 1980, p. x). To speak of the capacity for a reader's interaction with a text to cause an adjustment of his or her focus is to speak of the transformative potential inherent in the process of reading. Arnold (1994) further highlights the transformative power of the act of reading:

As readers and writers we engage with texts physically, psychologically and personally. We direct the pace of the

reading and the degree to which we identify imaginatively with characters and events, but sometimes we can be seduced by the power of the writing to shift our attention and affirm or challenge our mind frames (p. 95).

The pedagogical implications of reader-response theory are clear. As Andrews (2001) states: “The business of teaching a book becomes not so much a matter of exegesis or leading one’s students to ‘appreciate’ the qualities of a work, but enabling access to it and allowing the readers to make their own versions of it” (p. 81). Bakhtin (1981) points out that there are a multiplicity of voices in any culture and he highlights the importance, when reading literature, of remaining open to different possibilities (p. 37). Greene (1990) puts it this way:

There must be an ongoing intentional activity if literature is to be realized as emancipatory. The fixed and arbitrary must be acknowledged and refused; there must be a consciousness of differing modes of discourse, of changing voices in the dialogue (p. 265).

Seitz (1992) explores the notion of a rhetoric of reading, arguing that “reading requires a rhetorical positioning similar to that assumed in conversation. Reading, like dialogue, constitutes a form of social engagement which consists of both reception and participation” (p. 143). This view is not, however, subscribed to by all teachers of English literature. Indeed, English literature classrooms are sometimes places in which monolithic interpretations of literary texts (usually the teacher’s) are preached. As Andrews (1994) points out:

Much teaching and examination of literary ‘response’ denies the possibility of dialogue and resistant or critical reading, partly because of its pedagogy and partly because it sets up an Arnoldian contrast between ‘life’ and ‘art’ in which there can be no real critique of literature, in turn because ‘life’ is seen as unmediated by ideology and language (p. 84).

It is difficult to see how a closed approach to literary response, one that “denies the possibility of dialogue”, may be transformative. I would argue that Seitz’s (1992) view, that recognises the crucial role of the individual reader in engaging with the text, in a form of silent dialogue, is crucial to an understanding of the transformative potential of literature.

There is no doubt that the choice of texts has a bearing on the degree to which the study of literature may generate critical reflection and self-reflection in students. In discussing young children's fiction, Bettelheim (1976) makes the following point that I believe is relevant for readers of any age:

For a story to truly hold the child's attention, it must entertain and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him (p. 5).

This is not to say that only the literary classics should be studied in the English classroom. There is, I believe, a strong argument for students exploring a range of texts (visual and print; fiction and non-fiction; some from the classical canon and some from popular culture). Indeed, this is the focus of the new English syllabuses in New South Wales. This is highlighted in the "Rationale for English in Stage 6 Curriculum", in the Board of Studies Stage 6 Syllabus (1999), where it states: "English involves the study and use of language in its various textual forms, encompassing written, spoken and visual texts of varying complexity, including the language systems of English through which meaning is conveyed, interpreted and reflected" (p. 6). Where I have been given flexibility to choose the texts to be studied by my classes, I have sought to choose those that I believe will enrich my students' lives. One such text that, in Bettelheim's words, stimulated the imagination, developed the intellect and clarified the emotions of my Year 11 students and, in doing so, fostered critical reflection and self-reflection, was Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953). In the following section, I will analyse some extracts from my Year 11 students' reflective and critical writing in order to explore the ways in which the study of literature impacted on them.

Writing in her learning log, Naomi reflected upon her thoughts and feelings as she engaged with Miller's *The Crucible*:

*The Crucible* inspires anger in me. It makes me really angry that people had the opportunity to let their petty insecurities and shortcomings become the means of ending many innocent

people's lives. It also raises the issue of capital punishment. What right does anyone have to take the lives of others? Who gives a person permission to play God? It disgusts me. I think that a person who takes another person's life, be it under the guise of justice or not, is every bit as bad as the person who committed the initial crime. This is a topic of much debate in my house. My dad doesn't agree with me. He claims my views are tainted by youthful ideology. But, wouldn't that mean, by the same token, that his views are tainted by life experience and age?... Hmm, I might speak to you about this issue tomorrow. It is something I feel passionate about. I feel that I could happily write thousands of words on this topic (Learning Log: 3.3.01).

This is a good example of literature provoking both a rational and an emotional response in the reader. Naomi mentions her "anger" and also that the play "disgusts" her. (Clearly, in the context of this reflection, this is not a criticism of Miller's ability as a playwright, but an emotional response to the subject matter of the play.) Naomi also responds intellectually to the subject matter of the witch trials in Salem. She gives voice to her ideas on capital punishment and asks the rhetorical question, "Who gives a person permission to play God?" What is clear here is that the deaths in the play provoked a response in Naomi that led to her developing, or consolidating, a strong perspective on capital punishment, despite opposition from her father. Naomi's thinking is passionate, reflecting her close engagement with the world of the text. Greene (1991), in arguing for "a central role to be played by the arts and humanities in the teaching of thinking" (p. 65), stresses the importance of linking passion to thoughtfulness and contrasts this to the type of thinking that is often valued because it solves problems and reaches fixed conclusions:

Passionless thinking too often slips into technical rationality, rule-governed, geared to closures and controls. Neutral, distanced, it solves problems, it calculates, it arrives at propositions, it concludes. Important though such thinking may be, it is not sufficient if we intend to provoke the young to be actively and humanely in the world, to become committed, to continue posing questions, and learning to learn. Thoughtfulness links thinking to desire, to reaching towards what is not yet; it ties it to imagining as well (Greene, 1991, p. 65).

Implicit in Naomi's comments is a passionate desire for the world to abandon capital punishment. In order for this type of passion to emerge in response to a literary text, I would argue that various levels of engagement with the text are necessary. There is first the need to enter the world of the text with a level of openness and empathy. The teacher of literature can either foster this openness or, through insisting upon a particular interpretation of a text, can block a student's desire to discover meanings of personal significance. There is then a need to apply the mind to making sense of the world presented in the text in order to be able to write about it. This requires imagination, for the imagination spontaneously poses questions in the critical reader's mind, such as, What if this character had made a different choice?, or What would the world of the text be like if that character had a stronger personality?. Greene (1991) describes the imagination as "the capacity to summon up what is not, to reach beyond the actual" (p. 71). Good critical thinking (and writing) is about asking provocative questions that implicitly challenge the lifeworld of the text. The result is inevitably a personal confrontation with the values and attitudes that the reader believes are redolent within the text. The reader may dream of becoming more like a character in a text, or may be indignant at the attitudes of a certain character. Whatever the response, in the process of critical contemplation and writing, an open, engaged and committed reader will begin to think beyond the parameters of his or her own milieu, and this is potentially transformative.

Naomi's thoughts on capital punishment in her own context were clearly brought into sharper focus through her engagement with the characters from Puritan Massachusetts found in Miller's play. Despite the strong opposing views of a significant person in her life, her father, the strength of Naomi's views testifies to the power of literature to act as a catalyst to critical thinking that may be transformative. Through discussions with her father, and in the classroom, an awareness of differing ideologies emerged for Naomi. She notes that her father claims that her "views are tainted by youthful ideology". Awareness of different possible interpretations of issues, and of conflicting ideologies, is an important dimension of transformative learning. My research highlights that this awareness can be heightened through students engaging with literary texts within the context of a dialogic classroom. As Greene (1991) states: "Readers willing to break with

the habitual, the mundane or the taken-for-granted in order to enter a fictional world might find themselves negating the social reality that conditioned them, seeking new ways of making sense” (p. 71).

In this Year 11 class, study of *The Crucible* was part of a larger unit of work in which a range of texts on the topic of “Conflict” were explored. After studying *The Crucible*, the class embarked upon study of the film *Evil Angels* (1988), directed by Fred Schepisi, based on the Lindy Chamberlain court case. In the Stage 6 syllabus in New South Wales, composed by the Board of Studies (1999), the study of visual texts, including films, forms an integral part of the curriculum. My students’ comments in class, and in their journals, reflected the fact that films, like print texts, triggered strong responses within them. On occasions, the viewing of films confirmed their existing perspectives, whilst in other instances, their viewing experiences challenged students’ existing views. Dornan, Rosen and Wilson (2003) highlight the active role of the viewer of a film in shaping meaning:

The film goer...watches the film selectively based on her prior knowledge and her ability to gather together the fragments that are most useful for making meaning out of such film conventions as montages, flashbacks, and dissolves. Like the reader of print texts, the film viewer decides where to set her attention. She looks at the screen, replete with images and incomplete explanations, and she fills in the gaps by filling in details that are not depicted on the screen. She constructs the meaning out of her imagination and experience (p. 162).

In Naomi’s case, the experience of viewing and studying the film *Evil Angels* provoked a reaction in her that consolidated her view of capital punishment. In the real life event represented in this film, Lindy Chamberlain was sentenced to prison for killing her baby Azaria, but was later released as the evidence against her was no longer deemed adequate. In response to the representation of these events in the film, Naomi wrote the following in one of her learning log entries:

*Evil Angels* is an extremely thought-provoking film and highlights the idea of injustice and the flaws of the judicial system. I can see justification here for my views on capital punishment. I think that until a flawless system of deciding guilt or innocence can be developed, capital punishment should be



outlawed on the grounds that it is too risky – too easy to make a crucial mistake. Although it would cost the state more to house a prisoner, taking someone’s life is too big a decision to be careless about (Learning Log: 27.4.01).

It is clear that Naomi brought to her study of *The Crucible* and *Evil Angels* a value system that she felt was confirmed by the world of the play. Seitz (1992) argues:

What our students need is to comprehend how their stories of reading reflect their own values and their ability to interact with the values of others: reading can only proceed through a framework of assumptions, and it is precisely their assumptions, their forms of positioning themselves before the text, that students must come to recognize (pp. 152-153).

Naomi is clearly aware of her assumptions about capital punishment, and in seeing her values echoed in the world of these texts, and contradicted by her father’s ideology, she is demonstrating a capacity to interact with the values of others. Interestingly, after identifying what she perceives to be a central issue in both *The Crucible* and *Evil Angels*, Naomi proceeds to make connections between the worlds of these texts and her world of immediate experience:

At school, one constantly gets accused of being a feminist (like it’s a bad thing!) just because you work hard and refuse to act stupid. They call you “feminist” as an insult. I hate that! Just because I’m female does not mean that I should cook, or clean, or stay home and raise children. I would love a family, but I also want a career. I want to be independently successful. Injustice in *The Crucible* definitely has parallels with my experience with boys at school and their attitudes to “feminism” (Learning Log: 27.4.01).

In his reflective learning log entries, another student, Joshua, demonstrates this same potentially transformative capacity to draw connections between the world of *The Crucible* and his own world:

I am also considering what my place in Salem would be if I had been there. Would I have joined in the mayhem? Maybe popped a few of my own enemies? Would the basic nature of survival within me cause me to commit the same shameful acts committed in *The Crucible*? Would I accuse another to save my own skin? Most likely (Learning Log: 24.3.01).

Here the play has provoked Joshua to question his own attitudes and likely behaviours. The entry demonstrates the fact that literature may provoke a type of inner dialectic within an individual and may generate a deep level of self-reflection that is potentially transformative.

Ashley, another student in this Year 11 class, reflected on the universal human character traits evident in *The Crucible* and made connections between the world of the play and his own world:

*The Crucible* accurately depicts human nature. The community of Salem is basically run by the fear of devils and I believe, in a metaphorical sense, that today's "devil" that runs society is the fear of failure.... The fear of failure and the desire to fit in reflects the fear in the play and thus it would seem that the human quality of being influenced by fear is common to mankind (Learning Log: 26.3.01).

For Naomi, Joshua and Ashley, the connections between the worlds represented in literary texts and their own worlds are vastly different, reflecting a lot about who they are and what they have experienced in their lives. Their reflections demonstrate reader reception theory in practice. For each of them, literary worlds functioned as a springboard from which they subsequently made judgements about their own world and about themselves.

## **7.3 Writing About Literature**

### **7.3.1 The Value of Writing About Literature**

Whilst reading literature is a powerful catalyst for self-reflection and transformation, the process of critically analysing an imaginary world through writing about it makes the possibility of transformation all the more likely. As with reflective writing, a written critical response to a literary text is more than a *record* of a person's perceptions, it is also a *process* by which these perceptions are shaped and revised. As Arnold (1991) argues:

By tapping inner speech in spontaneous writing, writers can witness their own language and thought and re-internalize it. Even more importantly, students' use of their own language to

explore and express a concept increases their identification with it and allows them to abstract its principles, shaping them within their existing cognitive constructs. This individualized shaping process involves using words, metaphors and images in ways which help learners to construe, either rigidly or loosely, a meaning for a concept. This construing will be a dynamic process of confirming, elaborating or reducing the boundaries of the concept each time it is encountered (p. 25).

In an attempt to encourage my students' personal engagement with literary texts, I have, where possible, asked them to choose their own topics for critical literary analysis. This is because the initial step of choosing a topic for literary exploration requires students to reflect critically on a text in order to decide which aspects of it most resonate with them. It also requires a degree of experimentation with a range of possible options. The freedom to experiment with ideas that this choice provides has, I believe, developed my students' intellectual and emotional capacities. As Eisner (1979) remarks:

Intentions need not be statable to be held. Intentions need not precede action, they can grow out of action. Rationality includes the capacity to play, to explore, to search for surprise and effective novelty. Such activities are not necessarily contrary to the exercise of human rationality, they may be its most compelling exemplification. What diminishes human rationality is the thwarting of flexible human intelligence by prescriptions that shackle the educational imagination (p. 163).

Asking students to choose their own topic for exploration also means that, in most cases, they are writing on areas about which they feel passionate, interested or curious. In short, their emotions and intellect are more likely to be engaged in the art of communication. In discussing the research process, Barthes (1986) expresses the importance (and the rarity) of such conditions for critical writing:

The task (of research) must be perceived in desire. If this perception does not occur, the work is morose, functional, alienated, impelled solely by the necessity of passing an examination, of obtaining a diploma, of ensuring a career promotion (p. 69).

In the light of this, I believe that as a teacher of English literature I have a distinctive role: to equip my students with the skills they need in order to

personally engage with, and passionately write about literary texts. As Smith (1999) puts it,

postmodern pedagogy is primarily the art of teaching students how to read, to understand not what texts mean in some fixed sense, but to learn to discern what is at work in the way in which meaning is achieved in them. In broadest terms, it is a matter of learning how to read one's own story in the context of the fuller cultural story (p. 124).

Mezirow (1991) argues that transformed meaning perspectives are evidenced through "a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (p. 169). As the examples from the previous chapter on critical reflection illustrate, students' reflective writing frequently highlights the ways in which their perceptions of themselves and their world are changing. When students identify increased self-confidence flowing from the process of tackling a formidable task and eventually achieving a successful outcome, for example, it is easy enough to observe this new confidence as they tackle subsequent formidable tasks. It is more difficult, however, to gauge to what extent new perspectives of the world, shaped by engagement with literary lifeworlds, are reintegrated into students' lives. Nevertheless, at the very least I would argue that students whose critical analysis of literature incorporates radical questioning of commonly held assumptions, who use metaphors to describe their thoughts (see 7.3.3), and who construct cogent, thought-provoking arguments are more likely to engage in critical self-reflection that may lead to transformation. This type of writing reveals evidence that the study of literature is fostering a type of critical thinking that is conducive to transformative learning. As students consider literary lifeworlds and make comparisons with their own world, or draw from literary lifeworlds universal truths about human nature, they are surely expanding their vision beyond their own realm of experience. Through the use of imagination, they begin to wonder, for example, whether others feel as they have felt, or whether they could feel as others do. Possibilities open out before them and fixed realities become open to reinterpretation. They become aware that they have the capacity to transform their experience, or to value their present experience in a new way.

### 7.3.2 Students' Writing on *The Crucible*

My Year 11 class's study of *The Crucible* included: dramatic reading and enactment of the play; discussion of characters and events; an exploration of the way language and dramatic techniques may shape meaning; a consideration of the political context in which Miller composed the play and in which the play was set; and discussion of the film version of the play, written and directed by Arthur Miller. After some thought-provoking class discussions on *The Crucible*, I asked students to consider an aspect of the play that was of personal interest to them. From here, they were asked to devise a topic that would form the basis of an extended piece of literary analysis. This written response was then to be submitted for publication in a class anthology of these Major Works. Most students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to choose their own topic, although for some, deciding upon a topic proved difficult. Interestingly, the essays that most clearly reflected transformative learning, fostered through a deep level of reflection and self-reflection stimulated by committed engagement to analysis of a literary lifeworld, were by students who had little or no help in choosing a topic for study. Some of the students' original topics included: "Fire, Brimstone and the Crumbling Edifice of Salem"; "The Proctors' Conflict as a Microcosm of the Salem Conflict"; "The Irony of Justice in *The Crucible*" and "The Cathartic Effect of Conflict in *The Crucible*". The additional benefit of students choosing niche topics according to their interests lay in the collaborative learning that followed, through peer mentoring (see Chapter 5) and through individual students giving presentations on their original topics to the whole class. The presentations and ensuing discussions fostered the students' awareness that they were experts in a particular area. This, in turn, fostered a level of self-confidence in some of them that was transformative. (For a more detailed analysis of the ways in which engaging in self-directed learning projects fostered transformative learning in students, see Chapter 8).

Through analysing excerpts from my students' critical writing in the section that follows, I will illustrate what I perceive to be the hallmarks of critical writing that displays the capacity for transformative critical reflection and self-reflection.

The following excerpt is taken from Anthony's extended essay on *The Crucible*, based on a topic of his own choice, "Fire, Brimstone and the Crumbling Edifice of Salem":

A fire will start when the smallest of sparks sets off enough fuel – a room full of hydrogen is just waiting to explode with catastrophic results, as witnessed in the Hindenburg disaster. What causes such a fire? It is tempting to say that spark, but it is better to look at the real cause: the fire within which is waiting to be released. Take away that single small event and the fire still remains, albeit without manifestation. You cannot say that the problem has been removed, for there is no guarantee that another spark won't light the flame in the future. And when it does, the explosion will be all the more devastating for the postponement. This is partly why the witch trials were so disastrous – the problems inherent in the repressive society of Salem were left without resolution for so long.

Where does this leave Abigail? Is she the cause of the crumbling edifice of Salem or does she just exploit the already present cracks? We as an audience most likely point the finger towards her as causing the witch trials, however I believe that she was merely the last, small part of a far greater cause. Interestingly enough, historians are not so hard on Abigail as Miller is in *The Crucible*. Most history makes little reference to Abigail, instead describing the witch-hunts as being "stimulated by voodoo tales told by a West Indian slave, Tituba". So why has Miller portrayed Abigail as being so responsible for the trials? Probably because it is easier to evoke an emotional response against such a person than against a long history of suppressed social tensions. Abigail becomes the scapegoat when really the perpetrator is so much more than just this one woman. When we are presented with the tale of Proctor's affair with Abigail, and her evil determination to have him once more, it is tempting to see her as the sole source of the problems. But when we remove ourselves from this emotionally and start to analyse the clues which Miller gives us as to the real source of the social tension, we see that, though undeniably evil, Abigail is more an opportunist than an engineer of the cracking edifice.

After some elaboration of these ideas, the essay concludes with the following paragraph:

What then can we conclude? Must we alter our assessment of the play? Must we now exonerate Abigail in favour of the greater societal evil? No, as long as we realise that the evil in Salem is not as simple as it first appears. Hale realises this

mistake too late, and his agony is warning to us as an audience not to succumb to the same deception. Many forms of fire and brimstone play at the walls of the crumbling edifice of Salem.

### 7.3.3 Generating Metaphors

Perhaps the most striking feature of these excerpts from Anthony's essay is the extended use of metaphor throughout. References to Salem as a "crumbling edifice", and to the sparks that ignited the fire waiting to happen in Salem, demonstrate a quality of thinking that extends beyond literal restatement to deeper analysis. I suspect Anthony chose to use extended metaphors throughout his essay to provide his readers with a vivid image of his ideas. But he has also *shaped* his ideas through the creative use of metaphor, enabling him to explore and analyse the nuances of the text through manipulating, refining and extending his metaphorical constructs in much the same way that a painter shapes a world on canvas. Through tapping into the image-based right hemisphere of his brain, the hemisphere traditionally neglected in school contexts (McCarthy, 2000, p. 98), Anthony demonstrates a capacity to imagine parallels. His use of metaphor is also a creative act, showing a broadening of perspective – an opening out of thought – rather than a safer, more literal appraisal of the literary text – a closing in of thought. Schön (1979) points to two ways of viewing metaphors. One way, he argues, is to view them as puzzles that need to be solved in order to form meaning. However, he also draws attention to the view that metaphors are

central to the task of accounting for our perspectives on the world: how we think about things, make sense of reality, and set the problems we later try to solve. In this second sense, 'metaphor' refers both to a certain kind of product – a perspective or frame, a way of looking at things – and a certain kind of process – a process by which new perspectives on the world come into existence (Schön, 1979, p. 254).

In this second sense, these "generative metaphors" reflect an ability to engage in the process "of carrying over frames or perspectives from one domain of experience to another" (Schön, 1979, p. 254). The capacity to think in this way is potentially transformative because it reveals a mind (and heart) that is willing to imagine other worlds, to see parallels and contrasts with established patterns of

thought and to generate language constructs that draw connections between disparate objects and concepts. This requires a degree of openness and critical reflection.

Deshler (1990) argues that “metaphors deserve primary consideration in any learning process that attempts to assist us in critical reflection of our presuppositions regarding meaningful primary subjects” (p. 310) and highlights the transformative potential of the metaphor:

Metaphors are also important for transformative learning because they provide us with the capacity as agents to make sense of the universe, sort out perceptions, make evaluations, create an adventure in meaning, and guide our purposes. They have the capacity to empower and emancipate as well as to seduce. Humans are the only animals to create metaphors. Creating metaphors is an act of naming the world and thus is an act of power. When we accept without critical reflection others’ definitions of the world, we have not exerted our own power (Deshler, 1990, pp. 310-311).

Deshler’s view speaks to me as a teacher interested in transformative pedagogy. If the use of metaphor has the capacity to promote critical reflection, to empower and to emancipate – and, in turn, to promote transformative learning – then I am mindful of the need to foster metaphorical literacy in my students, and to provide them with ample opportunity to experiment with metaphorical language. As Andrews (2001) argues: “Opportunities to discuss metaphor should be seized, as should opportunities to talk about other aspects of language, like etymology, word construction and variation” (p. 39).

#### **7.3.4 Posing Questions**

Another feature of Anthony’s writing in the extract above that reveals transformative potential is his use of questions. As with his use of metaphors, it could be argued that his use of questioning is designed to engage his readers, but his use of questions can also be seen to reflect an inner dialectic. His argument emerges as he internally debates various possibilities. When Anthony asks, “Where does this leave Abigail? Is she the cause of the crumbling edifice of Salem or does she just exploit the already present cracks?”, it is clear that he has



considered the more straightforward, perhaps more commonly held view that Abigail is a wily antagonist responsible for the loss of innocent lives in Salem. It is through asking the question, “Is she the cause of the crumbling edifice of Salem?” that another question forms in his mind: “or does she just exploit the already present cracks?”. The second question leads him to explore the view that problems within Salem were endemic and highly susceptible to exploitation. There is a shift, or transformation, from one view to another, that is evident in his writing. Now whether he seriously entertained the first view, or it was simply a straw man set up for him to demolish, does not really matter. What is important is that Anthony’s writing reflects engagement in an inner dialectic. I would suggest that this type of thinking and writing shows *the capacity* for perspective transformation. It shows a mind open to possibilities outside the regular, in the same way that the use of metaphors shows the capacity to construct imaginative possibilities. Arnold (1991) states: “Somehow young writers need to recognize that writing is a way of creating from a monologue with self, a dialogue with others” (p. 25). Anthony shows his ability whilst engaging in “dialogue with others” to demonstrate a highly reflective “monologue with self”.

### **7.3.5 Embracing Multiple Perspectives**

Anthony’s writing also shows his ability to consider multiple views simultaneously and to recognise that problems are often caused by a myriad of factors. In his conclusion, he even cautions his readers not to fall into the trap of over-simplifying matters. This openness to a range of perspectives is potentially transformative because it reveals the capacity to think beyond current presuppositions to the possibility that other views may also be valid. Langer (1997) refers to this openness to new ways of seeing and implicit awareness of more than one perspective as “mindful learning” (p. 4). A mind that actively seeks out other possible ways of thinking is a mind that is open to the possibility of transformation. I believe Anthony’s writing demonstrates that he possesses such a mind. His propensity to engage in debates in the classroom would support this view.

### 7.3.6 Identifying Parallels within a Text

Another student, Tanya, chose to write on a highly original topic based on her study of *The Crucible*. Her essay was entitled “The Proctors’ Conflict as a Microcosm of the Salem Conflict” and, like Anthony’s essay, it reveals potentially transformative dimensions. One of these dimensions, a capacity to recognise parallels within a text, is evident in the title of her essay. A portion of a paragraph from her essay reads:

In both the broad conflict of the witch trials and the microcosm of the conflict between Elizabeth and John, the events as they occur are a reaction to the atmosphere of guilt and repression. They represent a rebellion of the individual against the strict regulations over lifestyle that was a feature of both domestic and community aspects of late seventeenth century Puritans in Salem, Massachusetts. In the wider community, the first inner conflict is apparent in the girls over whether or not to admit to dealings with the devil. Hale, like Elizabeth in her probing of John, demands confessions of the girls to satisfy his somewhat misconceived sense of justice.

Here, and throughout her essay, Tanya picks up on the idea that what is happening between one husband and his wife is actually emblematic of what is happening, on a much broader scale, within a whole community. This ability to identify parallels in a text is potentially transformative because it is a precursor to being able to see resonances and dissonances with one’s own life in a literary text. When a text causes someone to be critically self-reflective, then the transformative possibilities are obvious. In the latter part of her conclusion, Tanya goes that step further, recognising that the weaknesses of the characters in the play can also be seen as universal human weaknesses and that she (as a reader or viewer of the text) is not exempt from being susceptible to such weaknesses:

[The play] is a condemnation of those who would exploit justice to serve their own ends, as well as those who are too weak to uphold their moral values and would rather conform to the mob mentality. The real potency of this message is achieved by causing the audience to recognise that we are ourselves guilty of some of the weaknesses of the antagonists, and we are repulsed not only by their sins but also by ourselves, because we can relate to them through the microcosm.

### 7.3.7 Identifying Transformed Meaning Perspectives in Literary Characters

Ashley's essay, entitled "The Ethical Dimensions of *The Crucible*", is illuminating because it highlights his capacity to identify transformed meaning perspectives in literary characters. In discussing the transformed meaning perspective of Reverend Hale in *The Crucible*, Ashley states:

Through this we can see Hale is beginning to see the lack of sense in the current court procedures. In Act IV, where Hale is pleading with Elizabeth to see if she can convince her husband to confess, he makes a comment about how he now realises that he came to Salem in the wrong frame of mind:

Let you not mistake your duty as I mistook my own. I came into this village like a bridegroom to its beloved, bearing high gifts of religion; the very crowns of holy law I brought, and what I touched with my bright confidence, it died.

Here we can see the transformation that Hale has undergone from the start of the play to this point. He is referring to earlier on in the play when he came to Salem with high expectations of finding the Devil and scratching him out of existence from the village. This, of course, did not happen, as he became aware that there was something other than supernatural forces at work in the town of Salem and was ethical enough to act on this realisation.

Here, Ashley recognises that Hale's transformation requires humility and integrity, and in doing so he highlights the moral dimensions of transformation. He lauds this transformation, describing Hale as "ethical". (As an aside, it is interesting to note that Hale's expression of his transformation is couched in metaphorical language. Perhaps Miller, too, recognised that profound changes in perspective are sometimes best articulated using imagery that transcends what can be conveyed using literal language). Recognition of transformation in literary characters is potentially transformative for students because it provides them with models of transformative learning. Ashley's recognition of Hale's transformation, and his astute analysis of this transformation, is a case in point. In his analysis of Hale's transformation, it is clear that Ashley's sensibilities have been touched through his connection with a literary character. In discussing significant works of

fiction, Greene (1978) testifies to the fact that, in their characterisation, authors often seek to show the consequences of resisting the type of critical self-reflection that promotes transformative learning:

My point is that works of this sort have a special capacity to arouse us to wide-awakeness in our own time and that this kind of arousal is a necessity if there is to be transcendence, if the matrix is ever to be changed....Wordsworth somehow knew this...Baudelaire knew it...Flaubert worked, because of it, to goad his readers to break with illusions and find their own truth. In all of these, there were intimations of "a certain laming of the personality" that would afflict those who stayed on the flatland, those trying to make their way uncritically in the modern and post-modern world (p. 37).

## **7.4 Exploring New Possibilities Through Creating Imaginary Worlds**

Whilst engaging with literary texts and writing critically about them can foster thinking and feeling that is potentially transformative, being called upon to *create* imaginary worlds can also be transformative for students. This is because students, in considering what type of literary lifeworlds to create, inevitably draw on a combination of their own experience and their imagination. They are free to create worlds, without restriction. In thinking about characterisation, students need to consider situations from a range of perspectives and in doing so, they are free to use the full repertoire of literary techniques available to them. Composing a literary world requires an awareness of a range of perspectives and this is potentially transformative because it signals liberation from the sometimes limiting world of an individual's actual experience and their established frames of reference. As Mezirow (2000) states:

Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by "trying on" another's point of view. The more reflective and open we are to the perspectives of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be (p. 20).

Encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences, and to play with these in the process of composing imaginative worlds, is an important dimension of transformative pedagogy. As Arnold (1994) states: “The teaching of writing is not about informing students prematurely about structures or patterns, it is about enabling or inspiring them by valuing their life experiences, their observations and self explorations as the powerful underpinnings of composing” (p. 100).

In addition to asking my Year 11 students to write a substantial critical response on a topic of their own choosing based on *The Crucible*, in the course of the year they were also required to compose a substantial creative composition. Whilst they were totally free to construct a highly original world, the loose notion of “journey” was to inform their work. They were also asked to experiment with narrative voice in their composition. The reason behind this second stipulation was that I thought it would make them more aware of the notion of multiple perspectives, and indeed this proved to be the case.

In response to this task, Joshua composed a story about a male anorexic entitled “Voices of Anorexia”, as he felt a lot had been written about women suffering from anorexia and wondered what the inner journey of a male anorexic could be like. His reflections on the process of writing this story are illuminating. I quote from his reflective learning log:

I wrote lots and lots of words and then deleted them, not feeling that I was achieving the right narrative voice. I needed to do some research. I read a few books and looked up lots of information on the web. Most of the information was either scientific and hard to decipher, or it was written with the clear motive of promoting understanding for this illness. Nonetheless, I still found many useful pieces of information. The description of the causes of the disease as a “loss of identity” was a good starting point.... On one website, a recovered anorexic described the “voices of anorexia” and this was by far the most useful information I found in relation to what an anorexic’s thought processes might be.... I do think I have learnt a lot from writing this piece, especially in regard to narrative voice and the need to see things from a character’s perspective (Learning Log: 25.5.01).

Here Joshua's determination to create an authentic narrative voice for his protagonist shows his capacity to explore views beyond his own and his early awareness that his attempts in this direction were unsatisfactory reveals an impressive level of self-evaluation. In some ways, it could be argued that the process of creating another world requires even more of a capacity to engage with this world than the process of writing critically about an already created imaginary lifeworld. Creative composition, in opening students up to worlds beyond their own, and in requiring them to construct voices that are not their own, fosters empathy, open-mindedness and an awareness of new paradigms of thought and feeling. These qualities may be precursors to transformative learning.

Another student, Anthony, composed an imaginative text entitled "The Search". It begins with a letter that establishes a mystery, then jumps to the lyrics of a song that he composed with a friend, and then is comprised of three more letters, each of which presents a different perspective on the mystery. In his learning log, Anthony wrote about the process of composing his creative Major Work:

I can tell you...how some of the major work came to be. It is actually from very deep within my soul so I won't go too far (I get scared) but basically it comes from a period of distraught religious searching.

A friend came over a few months back and after a few hours we had a song which was to become "Search" and I wrote the lyrics afterwards. We're hopefully recording the song soon, so you can listen to it at some stage! Anyway, that's where the whole idea of perspective and truth also comes from. Again, very deep....

Oh, and the other thing which influenced my narrative was a fascinatingly weird book called *An Instance of the Fingerpost* by Iain Pears. More on that later. A fascinating thing to study when examining narrative voice, by the way! (Learning Log: 2.6.01).

In this extract from his log, Anthony reveals that his creative composition was a vehicle for his own searching. Through this fictional medium, he was able to give voice to his personal search and quest for meaning. Perhaps for Anthony the creation of an imaginary world, or worlds, was a safer way to explore the possibility of ideological transformation than through reflective writing: "I won't

go too far (I get scared)...". The creative composition provided him with the opportunity to create multiple voices and in this way he was able to explore issues from a range of vantage points. I would argue that the critical reflection required to formulate and develop multiple perspectives in an original, creative text shows a propensity for thinking and feeling that may be transformative.

## **7.5 The Transformative Dimensions of Reading and Writing for the Teacher-Researcher**

In order for the study of literature (involving engagement with literary texts, critical writing about these texts, and the composition of imaginative texts) to be transformative for students, I would argue that the teacher of literature needs to be committed to transformative pedagogy. Primarily this involves fostering an emancipatory environment, so that students feel free to compose personal responses to literature and original literary texts that are connected to their own experience and that explore realms beyond their own experience. On another level, transformative pedagogy involves teachers themselves being open to the potential for reading and writing to change them. Greene (1978) puts it this way:

I do not see how individuals who know nothing about "the powers of darkness," who account for themselves by talking about "chance, circumstances, and the times," can awaken the young to question and to learn. Learning involves a futuring, a going beyond. Teachers who themselves are submerged, who feel in some sense "finished," like the desks before them or the chalkboards behind, can hardly move students to critical questioning or to learning how to learn (p. 39).

Engagement with literary texts is important for teachers as well as for students:

It seems clear enough that interpretive encounters with literature can, at least to some degree, lead to clarification of modern readers' lives. Turning our attention to our own life-worlds and our own situations we ought – by coming in touch with a range of adversary artists – to find ourselves breaking with submergence, posing our own critical questions to reality (Greene, 1978, p. 38).

For the teacher-researcher engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology, as I have been, literature may also illuminate aspects of the human condition, so that first-hand experience in a pedagogical context is enriched. As van Manen (1997) states:

As we identify ourselves with the protagonist of a story, we live his or her feelings and actions without having to act ourselves. Thus we may be able to experience life situations, events, and emotions that we would normally not have. Through a good novel, then, we are given the chance of living through an experience that provides us with the opportunity of gaining insight into certain aspects of the human condition (p. 70).

Engagement with phenomenological literature is another means by which the teacher-researcher may confront new perspectives that may be transformative for them in their approach to pedagogy. As van Manen (1997) proposes:

A human science researcher may benefit from studying how other human science scholars have addressed and brought to text their understandings of selected pedagogical topics. In this way, a phenomenological study of a topic of our interest may suggest different ways of looking at a phenomenon, or reveal dimensions of meaning which we had hitherto not considered (p. 76).

Of course, the primary “text” with which a human science researcher is called to hermeneutically engage is that of their pedagogic lifeworld. In the course of “reading” this text, the process of writing is of seminal importance. Speaking of the process of writing in the research process, van Manen (1997) states:

Writing fixes thoughts on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world. As we stare at the paper, and stare at what we have written, our objectified thinking now stares back at us. Thus, writing creates the reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences (p. 125).

For Barthes (1986), writing is not merely a part of research, but is its very essence (p. 316). Van Manen (1997) draws attention to the paradoxes inherent in the writing process:



Writing involves a textual reflection in the sense of separating and confronting ourselves with what we know, distancing ourselves from the lifeworld, decontextualizing our thoughtful preoccupations from immediate action, abstracting and objectifying our lived understandings from our concrete involvement (cf. Ong, 1982), and all this for the sake of now reuniting us with what we know, drawing us more closely to living relations and situations of the lifeworld, turning thought to a more tactful praxis, and concretizing and subjectifying our deepened understanding in practical action (p. 129).

Through critical reflection and self-reflection, and through the process of writing about lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenological research can transform the teacher-researcher's meaning perspectives. Indeed, the laying aside of preconceptions, and the openness to lived experience (with all its surprises) that hermeneutic phenomenology involves, all but guarantees that learning for the teacher-researcher will be transformative. As a teacher-researcher, the lived experience that has been of particular interest to me incorporates worlds both seen and unseen. One lifeworld – or my interpretation of it – is visible to me as I observe the activities and interactions occurring within my classrooms. Other lifeworlds emerge as I discover what is *invisible* to me: the thoughts and feelings occurring inside my students and, as a result, in their worlds of action beyond my classroom. Clearly, these internal processes are detectable only when students choose to reveal them to me. I have discovered that the degree to which they will do so is largely determined by the manner in which I respond to their disclosures. My own unfolding insights about pedagogy that crystallise after reflection upon students' perceptions are, in a very real sense, a living testament to what is happening at the heart of my teaching and learning practice at any given time. Students' perceptions (revealed in their reflective learning logs, in their critical and creative writing and in discussion with them) are a fuel that ignites my understanding so that my pedagogical practice, in response, constantly undergoes transformation. Indeed I would argue that the approach to pedagogy that best fosters transformative learning in students is flexible, dynamic, reflexive and therefore itself open to transformation.

## **7.6 Forging a Compelling Dynamic: Hermeneutic Phenomenology for the Teacher-Researcher and for Students**

As students explore the lifeworlds of the literary texts to which they are exposed, they themselves may engage in a form of hermeneutic phenomenology. When this occurs, I would argue that the teacher-researcher and his or her English students are not merely engaged in similar pursuits, but are capable of generating a dynamic that fuels the transformative capacities of both. This dynamic is characterised by empathy borne out of parallel experience. In the case of a teacher-researcher, attunement to pedagogical lifeworlds is likely to make him or her an empathic leader of learning who is sensitive to students as they engage in their personal interpretations of literary lifeworlds. Because of the teacher-researcher's commitment to returning to "the things themselves" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 680), he or she will value students' personal interpretations of literature and will acknowledge the richness of original, evocative writing. In my experience, a corollary of this has been that as my students have developed confidence in their ability to interpret literature and to discover personal connections with literary lifeworlds, their transformations have generated greater energy within me, inspiring me to consider new ways to transform my pedagogical practice in an attempt to promote their future growth. In this sense, my students have been catalysts for transformative learning in me, as I have re-shaped my pedagogical practice in response to their own transformative learning experiences. According to Smith (1999), an essential ethical dimension of hermeneutic inquiry is the researcher's commitment to reporting his or her own transformations:

The conversational nature of hermeneutic truth points to the requirement that any study carried on in the name of hermeneutics should provide a report of the teacher's own transformations undergone in the process of the inquiry.... Underscored here is a profoundly ethical aspect to hermeneutic inquiry in a life-world sense, namely, a requirement that a researcher be prepared to deepen her or his own self-understandings in the course of the research. Other people are not simply to be treated as objects upon whom to try out one's methodological frameworks (p. 38).

I would argue that the impetus for this self-disclosure should not come from ethical considerations alone, but also because through dialogue about the transformations experienced by both teacher-researcher and students in their respective hermeneutic inquiries, the capacity for further transformation for all is heightened significantly. The interaction between teacher-researcher and students generates a combustive transformative energy that would be significantly diminished if teacher-researcher and students were merely engaged in solipsistic hermeneutic inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenology is essentially relational. The more this relational dimension is embraced, rather than repressed, the greater is the transformative potential for all involved. For the teacher-researcher committed to creating a shared reality with his or her students, the rewards are undeniable. Maxine Greene (1990) comments with wisdom on the power of literature, discovered in an emancipated context, to serve as a catalyst for transformation of adults:

Acceptance can too easily become subservience and thoughtlessness. The adult educator's concern (indeed, her or his loving concern) can still be to provoke an unease that leads to wonder and to inquiries, that awakens passion, that provokes desires to choose and to transform. It is again a matter of confidence in human freedom. That, where literature is involved, is where emancipation might begin (p. 266).

I would argue that this "concern" of the adult educator should also be the focus of the teacher of literature in a high school context. Through trusting students' abilities to engage with literature in ways that are personally meaningful for them, the high school English teacher can engage in transformative pedagogy that may lead to learning that is transformative for their students and for themselves.

## Chapter 8

### The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning

*It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.*

Albert Einstein

#### 8.1 Developing a Personal Pedagogical Model of Self-Directed Learning

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the ways in which transformative learning in students may be fostered through self-directed learning. When I began my research into the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy, I discovered rather quickly that as much as I might like to impart knowledge to my students that would profoundly transform them, the transformative learning experience never seemed to work that way. I became aware that the more freedom I gave students in the learning process, the more likely they were to experience a range of affective and cognitive responses that were conducive to transformation. Allowing students a considerable degree of self-direction in their learning inevitably meant that they were confronted with the uncomfortable, sometimes overwhelming, emotions associated with embarking on the unknown. It became apparent to me that transformation is often the result of an individual taking control by navigating their way through new and challenging domains of learning. This control may be experienced through actively and reflectively engaging in dialogic learning (see Chapter 4), through discovering how to be a mentor to others (see Chapter 5), through engaging in critically reflective writing (see Chapter 6) or through being touched in a unique way by the powers of literature (see Chapter 7). It also may be exercised through self-directed learning centred around an individual's personal areas of interest. When embarking upon this type of learning, students frequently feel they are out of their depth, but as they embrace the challenge, they often come to realise that their initial assumptions about themselves as learners were limited or distortive. The

challenging task of taking control of their own learning eventually leads to the accomplishment of goals they thought were beyond them and this, in turn, leads them to revise their previous meaning perspectives related to their perceptions of themselves. As Cranton (1994), in synthesising a range of perspectives on the educator's role in the context of adult learning, states, "Learner empowerment is seen as a prerequisite to critical self-reflection and potentially transformative learning; this process can also be described as an empowering one with increased freedom or autonomy as an outcome" (p. 142).

I first became aware of the highly personal nature of transformative learning before I embarked on my research, when I was involved in a pilot enrichment program in which seven of my Year 8 English students embarked upon a 3000 - 4000 word piece of self-directed literary criticism on a topic of their choice. All of the students were boys because the school is comprised of boys only up until the end of Year 9 and then becomes co-educational from Year 10 to Year 12. The group was a combination of volunteers and students I thought would benefit from such an experience. They undertook this work in addition to their regular studies. As participants in the program, they were required to determine their own topic, set their own learning goals and develop their own ideas. Throughout the duration of the task I functioned as their facilitator, rather than their teacher. As they engaged in this process of self-directed learning, it became clear to me that these students were making important choices in the learning process that increased their sense of themselves as people in control of their own learning. This growing awareness extended to their attitude to learning in contexts beyond the self-directed learning task. For example, I noticed that these students became more willing to challenge the views of others in class discussions and better at self-monitoring, self-regulation and time management. At the same time, they also confronted a range of emotions that surfaced as a result of the self-directed learning process. At the completion of the task, each of the seven students indicated, either in his learning log or in person, that he felt more confident about his capacities as a learner as a result of his participation in the self-directed learning project. Being involved with these students in this pilot enrichment program made me curious about the nature of transformative learning and

transformative pedagogy and indeed this experience was instrumental in my decision to undertake research into this area.

The results of this pilot program led me to consider the ways in which I could develop a model for self-directed learning that would maximise the opportunities for my students to experience the freedom conducive to transformative learning. Much of the literature on self-directed learning is written in the context of adult learning (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979; Brookfield, 1985; Lowry, 1989; Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997) and it emphasises the important role of the facilitator. I have learnt from listening to and observing my students that freedom and a sense of control in the learning process in these formative adolescent years is also significant to high school students. It is the nature of transformative learning that individuals experience it in unique ways. The learning process that leads to transformation is emancipatory in nature (Freire, 1993; Collard and Law, 1989) and therefore often includes a high degree of personal control, resulting in highly personalised changes. Self-directed learning offers this personal control. It may also give rise to a range of emotional responses in students, some of which may prove uncomfortable for them. My experience has led me to conclude that an important dimension of transformative pedagogy is that it provides students with opportunities for self-directed learning, and at the same time provides them with the scaffolds necessary to persevere through the confronting emotional landscape they may traverse in the process.

Whilst the nature of what constituted transformative learning for my students who engaged in self-directed learning projects differed from one student to the next, the emotions that they experienced along the way were often similar. Through listening to my students' thoughts and feelings about their self-directed learning experiences, through observing them engage in self-directed learning and through reflecting upon their experiences, I began to realise that many of them experienced very similar emotions at particular points in the learning process. I also noticed that their emotional responses triggered particular pedagogical responses from me. As I began to analyse more closely students' emotions at various stages in the course of a self-directed learning task, and began to consider my responses to these, I developed a model that I have termed The Spiral of

**Transformative Self-Directed Learning.** In this chapter I will elaborate upon this spiral. In many ways, the spiral draws together what I perceive to be some of the threads that, when woven together, may lead to learning that is transformative for students. These threads have been identified in previous chapters and include: students feeling free to respond personally to literature; dialogue between peers and between students and their teacher; a teacher's empathic attunement to students' needs; and students engaging in critical reflection and self-reflection. Because I wish to draw together many of the facets of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy in this chapter, my adumbration of the stages of the process of self-directed learning is rather detailed. This detail is also needed in order to do justice to the complexity of the psychological and emotional experiences of my students.

A model of this nature runs the risk of sounding definitive and so a caveat should be added. As this is a phenomenological study, it reveals what I have discovered through my own experience as an observer and facilitator of the self-directed learning of my high school English students. Some patterns or themes have emerged for me, and these may prove helpful to others, but in different learning contexts other phenomena related to self-directed learning may well emerge and other models may therefore be more helpful.

## **8.2 The Potentially Transformative Nature of Self-Directed Learning**

In his critical review of the research related to self-directed learning in an adult learning context, Brookfield (1985) states:

The most commonly accepted definitions of self-teaching (Tough, 1967) and of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975) emphasize the fact of the learner's control over the planning and execution of learning. Indeed, a strong measure of independence in controlling the direction and conduct of learning is taken as a defining feature of self-direction (pp. 9-10).

In speaking of self-directed learning, Merriam and Caffarella (1991) express the view that "educators of adults have often overlooked this context for learning or

considered it less important than learning that takes place in formal settings under the direction of a teacher or instructor” (p. 41). Arguably, this is even more true within a high school context. The scope of learning that is termed “self-directed” may encompass a range of activities, but it always involves the learner taking control. As Lowry (1989) states, “Self-directedness depends on who is in charge – who decides what should be learned, who should learn it, what methods and resources should be used, and how the success of the effort should be measured” (p. 1). With ownership of the learning process comes a range of emotional responses, from excitement at the prospect of being able to discover and create new ideas, to distress at the responsibility associated with it. As Candy (1991) points out, “like any other human attribute, the ability (and willingness) to exert control in the learning situation varies from person to person” (p. 371). The extent to which educators are willing to relinquish control also varies, but it is generally agreed that allowing students to take ownership of their work is central to self-directed learning.

In the context of the self-directed learning tasks in which my students engaged, I sought to give them as much control over the learning process as possible. They were responsible for choosing their own topics, devising strategies for accomplishing their long and short term goals and for managing their time accordingly. Having said this, I set the overall parameters of the task and the ultimate deadline and also established scaffolding that I felt would be helpful to the students (see 8.6). In this sense, Hart’s (1990b) recognition of the power that any facilitator of a learning experience possesses has relevance for the learning situations in which I was involved:

Whether teacher or facilitator, it is the intentions of this person, and of the institution or program he or she represents, that govern and control the overall learning process and that structure each individual learning situation. The privilege to be able to surrender special authority is not shared equally by all participants but remains a privilege of the leader (p. 63).

Hart (1990b) does, however, go on to express the view that the teacher or facilitator can link his or her expertise and authority to “a common or shared context of intentions and interests” (p. 63).



There are many positives associated with self-directed learning and I would argue that although the literature focuses on the benefits for adults, the benefits for high school students are also significant. Surely one of the goals of school education must be the attainment of knowledge, skills and values that will equip and motivate students to be lifelong learners. In relation to the group of students with whom I worked as I undertook this research, I saw evidence of the fact that the more they engaged in self-directed learning, the better they got at it and the greater were the benefits for them. As Bruner (1961) puts it, “Our aim as teachers is to give our student as firm a grasp of a subject as we can, and to make him as autonomous as we can – one who will go along on his own after formal schooling has ended” (p. 23).

Never has the need for students to be able to learn *how* to learn been greater than at the start of the twenty-first century, when what is “known” in so many areas seems to change so rapidly. Rogers (1983) expresses something of this modern educational climate when he states:

We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world (p. 120).

Here Rogers draws a connection between learning how to learn (and therefore having the necessary skills to engage in self-directed learning) and learning how to be open to change or transformation. At the heart of transformation lies the capacity to reflect upon the possible ways in which something could be perceived or done differently. In my work with my high school English students, I have discovered that my act of relinquishing control to them in certain parts of the learning process has freed them to engage in reflection and self-reflection that in turn has often triggered transformation in them. Indeed, giving students control

over their own learning has propelled them not only to reflect upon the learning choices they could make, but also to engage in self-reflection upon their emotional reactions to being given such freedom in the first place. This type of learning has been transformative for some of my students, as their frames of reference, especially those related to how they view themselves as learners, have altered as a result. Mezirow (1991) comments on this process in the context of adult learning when he states, “Overcoming limited, distorted, and arbitrarily selective modes of perception and cognition through reflection on assumptions that formerly have been accepted uncritically is central to development in adulthood” (p. 5). I would argue that this process, that Mezirow views as being unique to adults, may also be experienced by high school students. If knowledge is always treated as a definitive body of content to be passed from the all-knowing teacher to the novice student, it is difficult to see where the scope for transformation lies. If students are never encouraged to move outside their zones of comfort, to take control of their own learning, to reflect upon their feelings, including their feelings of inadequacy, and then to push through into new territory, then it is difficult to see how their perceptions of themselves may change. Crutchfield’s (1955) study of the extent to which people conform to group pressure, rather than taking control over their own decision-making, yielded some interesting results. The study revealed that

the individuals who tended to yield, agree, conform, the ones who could be controlled, gave general evidence of incapacity to cope effectively with stress, while the nonconformists did not tend to panic when placed under pressure of conflicting forces.

The conformist also tended to have pronounced feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, while the person who did not yield to pressure had a sense of competence and personal adequacy. She was more self-contained and autonomous in her thinking. She was also a better judge of the attitudes of other people.

...those who yielded, the conformists, tended to show a lack of openness and freedom in emotional processes. They were emotionally restricted, lacking in spontaneity, tending to repress their own impulses. The nonconformists, those who made their own choices, were, on the other hand, much more open, free and spontaneous. They were expressive and natural, free from pretense and unaffected. Where the conformist tended to lack insight into her own motives and behavior, the independent

person had a good understanding of herself (Rogers, 1983, pp. 276-277).

A corollary of this would seem to be that when a teacher holds fast to a model of teaching where students are spoon-fed, rather than encouraged to engage in self-directed learning or, put another way, where learner conformity is prized above learner autonomy, then transformative learning may be hindered. Crutchfield's (1955) findings certainly indicate that people who make their own choices are more likely to understand their own motives and behaviour and to possess a greater degree of "openness and freedom in emotional processes" (Rogers, 1983, p. 277). Being open to new emotions and ways of seeing is, after all, a precursor to transformative learning.

Much has been written in recent times on the importance of self-regulation, or "processes that activate and sustain cognitions, behaviors, and affects, and that are oriented toward goal attainment (Zimmerman, 1989, 1990)", in the learning process (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997, p. 195). Self-regulation involves continuous metacognitive adjustments by learners, either in response to, or in the absence of, feedback about their errors (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983). Cognitive theorists have examined the internalisation of self-regulatory habits and have studied how children and adolescents learn to function independently in an adaptive and creative manner (Bandura, 1986; Corno, 1989; Kopp, 1982; Mithaug, 1993; Paris and Newman, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979). Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory views human functioning as a series of interactions between behavioural, environmental and personal variables. Research shows, for example, that students possessing a high degree of self-efficacy (a personal variable) are more likely to embark on difficult tasks, apply themselves diligently to a task and persevere in the face of obstacles to the point where they experience success (achievement behaviours) (Schunk, 1996; Zimmerman, 1995). In the following sections, I explore what I have discovered about the transformative nature of self-directed learning. My focus is on the nature of pedagogy that may help to foster transformation through the self-directed learning process.

### 8.3 The Role of the Educator in Self-Directed Learning

Despite what would seem to be the positive benefits, research has shown that many teachers, especially of secondary school students, do not encourage their students to engage in self-directed learning. Rogers (1983) presents the findings of a long term study conducted by Aspy and Roebuck (1974) for the National Consortium for Humanizing Education in which they explored the question: “What makes these classrooms with person-centred freedom any better than others?” The research took place over seventeen years in forty-two states of the United States of America and in seven other countries. One of the results of their research highlighted the tendency that teachers have to provide students with information, rather than to encourage self-directed learning. Rogers (1983) states: “In one sample of 692 hours of secondary school teaching provided by ninety teachers, the total time devoted to thinking behaviors by *all teachers combined* was one hour and three minutes” (p. 205).

If a teacher hopes to see transformative learning occur in his or her students, it would seem that valuing and respecting their capacity to direct their own learning (within a supportive environment) is the first step. As Rogers (1983) posits:

One way of assisting the individual to move toward openness to experience is through a relationship in which she is prized as a separate person, in which the experience going on within is empathically understood and valued, and in which she is given the freedom to experience her own feelings and those of others without being threatened in doing so (p. 265).

Rogers (1983) argues that trusting the capacity (and desire) of students to learn about those things that are truly of interest to them will propel teachers to act as facilitators of self-directed learning:

If I distrust the human being, then I must cram her with information of my own choosing lest she go her own mistaken way. But if I trust the capacity of the human individual for developing her own potentiality, then I can provide her with many opportunities and permit her to choose her own way and her own direction in learning (p. 127).

In drawing on the experiences of several facilitators and their students, Rogers (1983) touches on the transformative results that can emerge when a learning community based on trust and freedom is fostered:

When a facilitator creates, even to a modest degree, a classroom climate characterized by all that she can achieve of realness, prizing and empathy; when she trusts the constructive tendency of the individual and the group; then she discovers that she has inaugurated an educational revolution. Learning of a different quality, proceeding at a different pace, with a greater degree of pervasiveness, occurs. Feelings – positive, negative, confused – become a part of the classroom experience. Learning becomes life and a very vital life at that. The student is on the way, sometimes excitedly, sometimes reluctantly, to becoming a learning, changing being (p. 128).

In essence, Rogers points to the need for empathy to undergird all learning, and empathy will include trust that is a necessary precursor to self-directed learning. Interestingly, Rogers addresses the emergence of feelings in a self-directed learning context. In the next section, I explore the range of emotional responses that my students reported that they experienced as they engaged in major self-directed learning tasks over the years that I conducted my research. I analyse these emotions in some detail because it has become clear to me that identifying and responding to my students' feelings throughout a self-directed learning task is one of the most significant facets of transformative pedagogy. An approach to learning based on the belief that students learn best through receiving information from a teacher is safe, comfortable and non-threatening. It also ensures that students experience an emotional equilibrium. However, as a result of this type of teacher-centred learning, students also experience a lack of control and a deadening of the emotional responses that have the capacity to catalyse effective, potentially transformative learning. By contrast, when

the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased (Rogers, 1983, p. 125).

## 8.4 Emotional Dimensions of Transformative Self-Directed Learning

This chapter highlights the importance of three main factors associated with the emotional dimensions of transformative learning.

The first of these is my discovery that setting major self-directed learning tasks, that challenge and extend students to move outside their comfort zones, is an important dimension of transformative pedagogy. My research has highlighted the fact that when students accomplish goals they thought were beyond them, they begin to reflect on the assumptions they held about themselves as learners. Sometimes this reflection leads to the realisation that their assumptions have been limited or distorted. Students may then revise these assumptions in the light of their learning experience. In this context, the primacy of *experience* to the revision of meaning perspectives is clear. Unless students live through the mental and emotional vicissitudes of a learning experience that stretches them beyond their preconceived notions of their capabilities, they are unlikely to question their existing meaning perspectives. As a teacher attempting to foster transformation in my students, providing transformative learning opportunities is of vital importance. In the context of adult education, King and Wright (2003) state:

Transformational learning is decidedly an open-ended process in both time and form; transformational learning opportunities in the classroom lay the groundwork so that adults can pursue it at their own pace and toward their individualized construction/s. The emphasis is on the learning opportunity and the process of developing new frames of reference and understandings, the journey and outcome remain in the learner's hands (p. 104).

Secondly, this chapter explores the importance of emotions to the processes of learning. It highlights the fact that the emotions that are brought to the surface through challenging self-directed learning tasks actually promote, rather than hinder, learning and that it is the interfusion of reason and emotion that aids the decision-making processes that are so crucial to learning.

Finally, whilst this chapter highlights students' emotions and recognises the importance of these to the learning process, it also draws attention to the fact that an important dimension of transformative pedagogy is the provision of emotional scaffolding for learners. In order for my students to persevere to the point where they were able to accomplish the goals they thought were beyond them, it was necessary for me to help them discover strategies designed to help them endure the uncomfortable emotions they experienced along the way.

Brookfield (1990) comments on the importance of emotions in the learning process:

When students speak about learning, they do so in highly emotional terms. This isn't surprising, yet the emotional dimensions of learning receive scant attention in formal research, for they escape standardized measures and experimental controls. As a researcher, it is much easier to focus on how learners perform according to unequivocally defined measures of achievement than it is to explore the discordant intensity of learners' emotional reactions. To students, however, their feelings and emotions run the gamut from profound embarrassment at their inability to seem as assured and confident as they feel they ought, to deep, angry resentment at the dismissive arrogance sometimes displayed by teachers. More positively, they feel aroused and excited at the prospect of being able to break out of conventionally accepted ways of thinking and behaving, and they are exhilarated when they can perform difficult tasks or understand complex ideas (pp. 45-46).

In line with Brookfield's comments, recent brain research can be viewed as a warning to teachers, especially those interested in transformative learning, of the detrimental consequences that may stem from ignoring students' emotions, as emotions are integral to the process of learning. The tendency to discuss rational processes as if they were entirely distinct from emotion has undergone considerable critical scrutiny. Significantly, recent research has revealed a more integrated relationship between the physiological processes of cognition and emotion. LeDoux (1989) argues that cognition and emotion are mediated by separate and interacting systems of the brain. Parrott and Schulkin (1993) go even further, arguing that "emotions entail cognition and prepare the organism for actions that are sensible only within the context of such cognition" (p. 56). They

point to “data showing that emotions anticipate future needs, prepare for actions, and even prepare for thinking certain types of thoughts” (p. 56). In the light of this data, they express the view that it “therefore seems mistaken to attempt to isolate emotions, either conceptually or physiologically, from the sorts of intelligent computations that are necessary for them to be adaptive” (p. 56).

De Sousa (1991) has written extensively on what may sound like a paradox: the rationality of emotion. He argues that the “function of emotions is to fill gaps left by (mere wanting plus) ‘pure reason’ in the determination of action and belief, by mimicking the encapsulation of perception” (De Sousa, 1991, p. 195). According to De Sousa (1991), “emotions set the agenda for beliefs and desires: we might say they ask the questions that judgment answers with beliefs and evaluate the prospects to which desire may or may not respond” (p. 196). His strong theses are that “our emotions underlie our rational processes.... and that emotion deals with the insufficiencies of reason by controlling salience” (De Sousa, 1991, p. 201). Taylor (2001) highlights that “it is emotions that limit what the brain will take into account, determined by patterns of salience (value) from the choices and options of almost limitless possibilities. Emotions establish the agenda for desires and beliefs” (p. 223). In a similar vein, Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1992) argue that without emotion, people cannot prioritize goals, or make progress towards goals.

Damasio (1994), a renowned neurologist, argues that emotions are essential to rational thinking and decision-making. He cites the case of Phineas Gage, whose behaviour first revealed a connection between impaired rationality and specific brain damage. After examining recent investigations of other such cases, and reviewing relevant findings from neuropsychological research in humans and animals, Damasio (1994) proposes that

human reason depends on several brain systems, working in concert across many levels of neuronal organization, rather than on a single brain center. Both “high-level” and “low-level” brain regions, from the prefrontal cortices to the hypothalamus and brain stem, cooperate in the making of reason.



The lower levels in the neural edifice of reason are the same ones that regulate the processing of emotions and feelings, along with the body functions necessary for an organism's survival. In turn, these lower levels maintain direct and mutual relationships with virtually every bodily organ, thus placing the body directly within the chain of operations that generate the highest reaches of reasoning, decision making, and, by extension, social behavior and creativity. Emotion, feeling, and biological regulation all play a role in human reason. The lowly orders of our organism are in the loop of high reason (p. xiii).

This contemporary research caused me to reflect afresh upon the role of emotion in my students' learning. Through the lens of the research, and through my experience, I began to see more clearly the value of encouraging students to reflect upon their feelings, to write about these feelings, and to engage in supportive peer relationships. I also began to realise that as a teacher seeking to foster transformative pedagogy, it is important for me to set tasks designed to trigger emotions in my students. At the same time, it is important for me to provide scaffolding for them as they experience and push through these emotions. In the next section I will explore some of the emotions that my students experienced as they embarked upon a challenging, major self-directed learning task. I will then seek to explain the ways in which I chose to respond to these emotions in my attempt to foster potentially transformative learning in them.

## **8.5 Initial Emotional Responses to a Challenging Self-Directed Learning Task**

### **8.5.1 A Disorienting Dilemma**

Two years after the pilot enrichment program with seven of my Year 8 English students, I embarked on my doctoral research. In this first year of my research, I set students in my co-educational Year 10 English class a major self-directed learning project. I remember vividly the day I described to them the nature of the task. I explained that I was interested to discover what fascinated them about literature and what types of literature they found most appealing. I told them that I was giving them the opportunity to engage in a self-directed learning task in which they would be expected to complete a 4000-6000 word critical response on

a literary topic of their choice. They discovered that they would have freedom to explore almost any area they found interesting, provided it afforded them enough scope. I explained that I wanted them to keep a learning log, or reflective journal, in which they would regularly record their thoughts and feelings about the learning process. I would read this throughout the project and would respond to the comments they would make, so that the journal would become one form of dialogue between them and me. They would have two terms to complete this project and it would culminate in the publication of an anthology of their works and a presentation evening. At the presentation evening they would present to an audience of interested people (family members; friends; other members of staff) some of their discoveries about their chosen research area and about the self-directed learning process.

Students' reactions to my delineation of this project were immediate. I was bombarded with questions: But how do we decide what to write about? How can we be expected to write so much? Can we really write about *whatever* piece of literature we like? Are you going to help us? I was aware that merely setting the task had engendered a range of emotions within the students and I encouraged them to write about these in their learning logs. For many of them, this was their first experience of self-directed learning and the longest, most demanding project they had encountered at school to date. Giving over control to the students and expecting them to produce a substantial piece of work were fundamental aspects of the project. I hoped that students would push through initial feelings of inadequacy and discomfort to a point where they would experience success and even transformation.

According to Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning schema, the initial catalyst to transformation is "a disorienting dilemma" (p. 168). Setting a challenging self-directed learning task seemed to function as a sort of "disorienting dilemma" for my students, generating what Mezirow (1991), drawing on Adorno, refers to as a feeling of "disequilibrium" (p. 148). The identification of this type of unsettling experience as the initial catalyst for transformative learning is widespread. Taylor (1998), having reviewed much of the literature in the field of transformative learning, concluded: "Most of the

studies that explored the complete process of a perspective transformation concur with this aspect of Mezirow's model, although some studies broaden the definition of a disorienting dilemma" (p. 41).

As I observed, spoke with and read the reflections of my students in this Year 10 class, I was able to identify the most common emotions associated with this sense of disequilibrium. In speaking of research into the phenomenon of transformative learning, Taylor (1998) states, "Most studies were carried out in retrospect and do not clearly know the participants' original perspective prior to a transformative learning experience" (p. 43). Because I asked students to record their thoughts and feelings in their learning logs from the inception of this challenging, self-directed learning task, I was fortunate enough to be in a position to notice and to document their *shifting* perspectives over the course of the project. They recorded their "original perspective" and so it has been possible for me to trace the areas in which some of them experienced change from the inception of the project to its completion.

The overwhelming majority of the students in this class began with the assumption that this task was too difficult for them. Indeed many of them were completely overwhelmed by it. For some of them, the transformative learning process would involve revising this assumption, or changing their frames of reference in such a way that their conception of their own ability would radically alter. This was a highly emotional process for many of the students. Courtenay, Merriam and Reeves (1998) draw attention to the emotional dimension of perspective transformation:

Assumptions are not simply cognitive constructs that are alterable without regard to feelings, attitudes, or shifts in behavior. Emotional attachments form a part of the context for assumptions; therefore, when assumptions are challenged, emotions are aroused also (p. 82).

Kegan (2000) highlights the fact that even for adults, self-directed learning may be threatening:

Adult students are not all automatically self-directing merely by virtue of being adults, or even easily trained to become so. Educators seeking self-direction from their adult students are not merely asking them to take on new skills, modify their learning style, or increase their self-confidence. They are asking many of them to change the whole way they understand themselves, their world, and the relationship between the two (p. 67).

If self-directed learning is confronting for many adults, then adolescents may well find it even more confronting.

### **8.5.2 Healthy Disequilibrium**

Cindy, an extremely able student, wrote the following in her first learning log entry after being told about the self-directed learning project:

This project scares me. I am afraid that I will be unable to find a topic I am really interested in and will have to spend hours on one I hate. However, I feel that if I can find a topic that I will enjoy dissecting I will find this project much easier.

The size of the work is also daunting. I am worried that I won't be able to maintain a high standard of expression for the length of the piece. However, I am interested in writing this piece in order to test my ability (Learning Log: 23.3.00).

In identifying that the work “scares” her, is “daunting” and that she is “worried” about aspects of it, it is clear that for Cindy this project constituted a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). Her fear stemmed from the fact that there were no obvious limits to her choice of topic, and from the fact that in having such a high degree of control over the project, Cindy knew she could not blame anyone but herself if she didn't like the topic! She alone would be responsible. Cindy was also daunted by the imposing length of the work she was expected to complete and by the fear that the quality of her writing could not be sustained throughout her work. I would suggest that these are all feelings that are not at all surprising given the nature of the task that loomed before her. Nevertheless, in spite of her expression of fear, Cindy also expressed the positive desire to test her ability. She felt a level of discomfort, without feeling so overwhelmed that she was paralysed when she contemplated the prospect of embarking on the task. For Cindy, the task triggered what I would term a healthy disequilibrium.

Naomi expressed similar feelings in her first learning log entry after being told about the self-directed learning project:

As I think about the work that is ahead of me, I feel slightly nervous, worried and have no idea really how to confront it.... I am not so much afraid of all the work, but it is the standard of work that is worrying me. I really want to create something that will make the whole task worthwhile. I hope that I can rise to the challenge and to my own expectations.

Looking back over the last few years of my school life, I realise that I have never been assigned anything like this before. I have never been set a task where I, the student, could choose a topic and work independently on it.... Apart from this, I have never written a piece of work of any significant length (Learning Log: 23.3.00).

It is clear that Naomi's nervousness and worry stem from a feeling of being pushed outside of her comfort zone. She realises that "she has never been assigned anything like this before" and is clearly overwhelmed by the prospect of working autonomously and of completing a work of this length. However, as with Cindy's initial learning log entry, this entry of Naomi's highlights a mixture of emotions. In addition to nervousness and worry, she expresses a desire "to rise to the challenge and to [her] own expectations." Naomi also wants "to create something that will make the whole task worthwhile." Here it is evident that Naomi is seeking meaning in the project. She is afraid of what lies before her, but she wants to push through these feelings ("to rise" and "to create") in order to experience a realm of learning that she has not previously experienced.

In a focus group interview conducted when Naomi was in Year 12, about two years after this learning log entry was written, I asked her to comment on how she felt at the beginning of one of her self-directed learning tasks. Naomi chose this first experience of such a task undertaken when she was in Year 10, stating:

At the start, I felt like really little, and I felt, hang on a minute, I'm a little baby. I don't deserve this. I can't believe she's making me do this. I was mad with you for making me do this.... I was really scared. It was, what's she going to think if I don't do well? So I'll have to strive to do well (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

Naomi's expression of her memory of the task in this focus group interview is more direct than the initial learning log entry, probably due to the fact that two years had elapsed. She knew me well by this stage and so probably felt free to express her thoughts and feelings more openly. It is arguably a more vulnerable account of her feelings than the learning log entry. In the focus group interview, Naomi comments on the anger she felt towards me for subjecting her to such an uncomfortable experience. Her anger with me flowed from her fear that she would not be able to meet the standards that she perceived I expected of her. It is interesting to note that in the learning log entry, written at the time the task was given to her, Naomi expressed fear that she would not meet her *own* expectations. Perhaps she feared not meeting *either* her own *or* my expectations. Her retrospective metaphor of herself as "a baby" is a helpful one, because it conjures up associated images of helplessness and dependency. For Naomi, it was painful being told that some of the crutches of "babyhood" were going to be removed from her.

As they embarked on their projects, most students experienced emotions similar to those described by Cindy and Naomi. Some students expressed slightly less anxiety than Cindy and Naomi, and a greater level of excitement. Eleanor, for example, stated in her first learning log entry after being told about the task:

I feel that this project will be a challenge for me because I have never embarked on such a large task before. I think it will be interesting and a change compared with any project I have done in the past.

The project is something I am looking forward to doing because I can choose any topic to analyse and it will give me the opportunity to explore literature of interest instead of set texts (Learning Log: 23.3.00).

In this entry, Eleanor is still aware of the challenging nature of the task. Nevertheless, her entry also contains a sense of eager anticipation and it appears that she relishes the freedom inherent in the task.

Other students expressed some awareness of the benefits of such a learning task, but focused primarily on their feelings of fear. Carmel, for example, wrote the following in her first learning log entry after being told about the task:

This project feels very daunting. I'm worried about being able to complete such a massive task, as I have never done anything like this before.... I don't even know where to begin.... I think this assignment will extend me and force me to be more independent in my learning (Learning Log: 23.3.00).

Nearly all students experienced a range of emotions, but their responses nevertheless reflected what I would call a healthy disequilibrium. They felt unsettled, unnerved or uncomfortable because they were aware that they were embarking on a challenging task that would involve confronting the unfamiliar. Nevertheless, they felt excited or energised by the prospect of tackling something new and by being given the freedom to test their capacity for self-discovery, or they at least wanted to rise to the challenge and "give it a go".

### **8.5.3 Unhealthy Disequilibrium**

Whilst nearly all the students in this class experienced healthy disequilibrium, a few students demonstrated what I would term unhealthy disequilibrium as a result of being given a challenging, self-directed learning task. A few students demonstrated either denial or, in one case, truculent resistance to the task. Another student demonstrated paralysis caused by extreme anxiety.

#### **8.5.3.1 Denial**

For Jodie, apathy, or a lack of motivation, meant that she denied the existence of the task for quite some time. When I asked her to write down her feelings about the task in her learning log, she eventually complied:

Ideally, I'd like to be a learner who is very motivated to learn, and someone who is very self-disciplined and organised rather than leaving everything to the last minute. I'd like to be someone who values studying and doing homework more, as at the moment I'm probably a bit careless in these aspects because I'm not too interested in them. I need to learn to manage time better and force myself to do things I don't like to do or find boring.

This major self-directed learning task doesn't interest me at all. I can't think of anything to write about and I can't be bothered with it all (Learning Log: 3.4.00).

As long as she clung to this mindset, I knew it would be difficult for Jodie to press forward to a point where she might experience change. Most of the time, she seemed to be in denial about the task, successfully blocking it from her mind. When questioned about it, she always seemed to have an excuse for her lack of progress, or if she did not have an excuse, she did not appear to be perturbed by this. The task was a low priority for Jodie. My concern for her lack of motivation led me to arrange a meeting with her mother. It became clear that this was a pervasive problem. Jodie was new to the school and had not made friends. She was not enjoying school and could not see the point of being there. All her class teachers were concerned by her lack of productivity. I wondered whether she may have been suffering from depression, but had no time to follow up this concern as Jodie left the school shortly after my initial interview with her mother. For reasons that never became fully clear to me, Jodie was in denial about the self-directed learning project. I learnt from Jodie that emotions experienced by students relating to situations outside the classroom may well impact on their capacity to commit themselves to challenging self-directed learning tasks.

In his initial learning log entry after being told about the task, another student, Alan, gave the impression of being unperturbed by it. In his initial learning log entry, he wrote: "It merely involves a 12-hour period of time, a deadline, an inhumane amount of caffeine and no small amount of pressure" (Learning Log: 26.3.00). The fact that Alan stated that he intended to procrastinate until the last minute, completing a six month project in twelve hours may, at first, appear as if he was in denial about the nature of the task. I came to discover later, however, that this was not the case. It was really an example of bravado, and an instance of a reflective log entry that was very consciously written for me to read. Perhaps I was supposed to be shocked, horrified or impressed that he could accomplish such a large task in a short time (even allowing for the obvious use of hyperbole)! In an informal conversation with Alan held about two months after the start of the project, he explained that he likes to be pushed with whatever he does, but that he is also "a bit cruisy." In this conversation he went on to explain: "My mind slows



down when I'm forced to do things in a certain way." (Conversation: 15.5.00). The initial log entry actually revealed that Alan needed to set his own agenda and work at his own pace. He appeared in denial about the length and difficulty of the task, but actually relished the freedom he had been given and just did not want to be "checked up on" too much throughout the project. In the focus group interview conducted two years after he embarked on this Year 10 task, Alan commented that he was "more than a little apprehensive" when he began this task (Focus Group Interview: 18.3.02). At the time, this apprehension was masked by bravado. I was aware throughout the Year 10 project that Alan was actually working diligently and his excellent final product was further evidence of his commitment to the project.

In Jodie's case, denying that the task had been set, or that it required any effort from her, quite obviously prevented her from making any progress. If Alan's complacency had been genuine, then this attitude would also have curtailed the transformative possibilities of the project for him.

#### **8.5.3.2 Resistance**

Another student, Charles, exhibited an attitude of strong resistance to the task. His initial learning log entry after being told about the task stated:

At this point in time I am quite unhappy at the fact that I'm being pushed into a second major work in only three years. I understand that this major work is new to many members of our class and is exciting and challenging for them. This viewpoint, however, isn't held by yours truly. If another major work must be undertaken, more of the year should be involved. I don't want to do another major work! (Learning Log: 23.3.00).

Charles had been one of the seven boys involved in the Year 8 pilot project two years prior to this self-directed learning task that he was assigned in Year 10. Interestingly, he had not expressed resistance to this first task at the time. (Indeed, as it was a voluntary program, if he *had* been resistant, he would not have been compelled to participate.) At the end of the Year 8 program, Charles even revealed that he had grown in confidence as a learner, as he had not expected he would complete such a work, and he had been happy with the results.

Nevertheless, in his first learning log entry after being told about the Year 10 task, recorded above, it is clear that Charles viewed the task as a punishment. He expressed the view that the fact that everyone in the year did not have to complete the task was a form of injustice. Instead of viewing the task as “exciting and challenging”, as he acknowledged many others in the class perceived it, Charles saw it as something he was being “pushed into” against his will.

About two months later, when we were away on camp, I informally interviewed Charles about his progress and noted down the key elements of his response. I vividly remember his response to my question, “Can you explain to me why you feel so strongly about not wanting to do the task?”

Charles replied, “I’d have to think about these books. It takes a bit of effort. I did it two years ago and I didn’t enjoy it then. It’s like being punched in the arm.” Charles’s image of physical pain to describe the learning experience has remained with me. When I went on to ask in this informal interview if he could identify any possible benefits of this type of project, Charles replied, “There may be some satisfaction in the end when the pain is finished.” Charles’s reaction caused me concern. I wanted him to enjoy the project and to grow as a result of it but, in spite of my best attempts, his resistance continued. My initial reaction to Charles’s truculent resistance was to spend time with him exploring possible topics that he might find interesting. I met with stronger resistance and a seemingly relentless desire to discuss the issue of why he was being forced to tackle the task. I felt that if Charles managed to find a topic he was interested in, some of his resistance would dissipate. It was a long process!

#### **8.5.3.3 *Paralysis***

Another form of unhealthy disequilibrium demonstrated by one student, Eric, could be described as paralysis. At first Eric did not react any differently from anyone else in the class. In the initial phases of the task, as students were exploring possible literary texts and consolidating their topics, Eric seemed a bit evasive, but so were some of the other students and I thought it may just take him a little longer than others to finalise his topic. He had some interesting ideas, such

as exploring the allegorical significance of some of C.S. Lewis's works of fiction written for young people. Nevertheless, when others began to write, Eric was still exploring possibilities. When I asked him to write down in his learning log what he was feeling about the project, I saw the first signs of Eric's perfectionist tendencies that resulted in an extreme form of writer's block, or what I have termed paralysis:

I want to get it right first time. I feel I have to get the most appropriate wording for every sentence straight away, but there are so many ways I can arrange the words.... My favourite button on the computer is the delete button.... I want to get a good mark. I want to do it well (Learning Log: 26.4.00).

I hoped that by writing about his feelings, Eric may begin to break the deadlock in his mind but, as with Jodie, I realised that the issues Eric was coping with were serious. When I spoke with Eric's father and asked him his perceptions of the value of reflective writing for Eric, his father replied that it made Eric feel stupid and that it emphasised his lack of self-worth. This was obviously not the answer I was hoping to hear. Being forced to mix with his peers who were buzzing with ideas only reinforced Eric's sense of inadequacy. As with Jodie and, at this stage, Charles, it seemed that there was little I could do to help Eric. I felt frustrated and worried, especially as I saw Eric plummet into despondency. He absented himself from school more and more frequently and when he was present in body, he was nevertheless absent in spirit. I suggested that he might like to withdraw from the task, which is what he effectively did, but he was reluctant to admit to me that this was what he had done. Again, it is difficult to know the extent of Eric's suffering. His father did not strike me as helping the situation. On one occasion, Eric's father informed me that he had tried everything to motivate Eric to write, including nagging him and even issuing "dire threats". Threatening Eric did not seem to me to be the most helpful of strategies. It became clear that Eric was experiencing this form of paralysis in other subjects, too. He began seeing the school counsellor, and it was not long before he was withdrawn from school to attend an eight week intensive program, run by a nearby hospital, designed to address anxiety disorders. He did not return to school.

#### 8.5.4 Reflections on the Initial Stages

Being assigned a challenging self-directed learning task caused my students to experience a feeling of disequilibrium. In most cases, this manifested itself in feelings of fear, anxiety, nervousness or apprehension, often coupled with feelings that the project could be exciting or rewarding. In these cases, students experienced what I have termed a healthy disequilibrium. In a few instances, students experienced denial, resistance, or paralysis, constituting what I have called unhealthy disequilibrium. What I have learnt through my interaction with students over the course of my research is that learning tasks that do not generate any form of disequilibrium are also unlikely to foster learning that is transformative. In most instances, it became evident to me that the short term (often unpleasant) emotions engendered by confronting a daunting task looming before them tended to promote the extended consciousness required for some of my students to experience transformative learning. Indeed I would argue that learning to respond positively to feelings of discomfort – pushing through these feelings into behaviours that will yield new, more satisfying emotions – is one of the keys to transformative learning, not the circumvention or eradication of these feelings of discomfort. Based on their study of the meaning-making process for some individuals who had been diagnosed HIV-positive, Courtenay, Merriam and Reeves (1998) conclude that the

initial reaction period is that time when the self attempts to draw from the old assumptions to explain the disorienting dilemma; it is critical to the meaning-making process because for transformation to occur, the individual must recognize that the old assumptions are inadequate for making sense of the present dilemma (pp. 77-78).

As a result of my interactions with my students after I had set them a challenging, major self-directed learning task, I discovered that they, too, attempted to draw on old assumptions about themselves as learners. For many of them, these assumptions generated the unsettling emotions that they experienced in the initial stages of the project. It was not until much later in the process and, for some, not until the completion of the project, that they realised the inadequacy of their old assumptions about themselves as learners. In order for them to move from their

initial feelings of discomfort and from the belief that they were unable to complete such a task, students needed to experience considerable emotional support from me, as the facilitator of their project, and from one another. Transformative learning occurred at the point where they began to realise that they could achieve what they initially thought was beyond them.

Based on my experience with students who experienced an *unhealthy* disequilibrium, I now believe there are times when it is best for such students to withdraw from this type of task. This is because their reactions may be symptomatic of a more fundamental issue that needs treatment before any task of this sort could be contemplated. I am speaking here of extreme cases only. Eric's anxiety disorder, resulting in a form of mental paralysis, and Jodie's broader issues, that perhaps masked her depression, are cases in point. In their study of women in crisis, Kilgore and Bloom (2002) argue that a crisis context presents conditions that are incompatible with transformative learning. My research would support this view, if by a crisis what is meant is extreme conditions that dominate all learning experiences. In most instances, however, the healthy disequilibrium experienced by students, reflected in their expression of feelings of fear, anxiety, apprehension and nervousness, was a positive sign that they may potentially experience transformative learning. As Brookfield (1990) comments:

When asked to speak about significant learning episodes – those that are vividly remembered as being crucially transformative and that are spoken about with pride – it is interesting how many students speak of episodes in which challenge was a central feature. They will choose events and occasions when they were faced with difficult situations or with dilemmas that had no clear resolution. These might be situations in which they were required to explore areas of knowledge that they found intimidating, times when they had to learn new skills that did not come easily to them, or occasions when they were asked to explore a worldview or interpretive frame of reference with which they did not feel comfortable. During these challenging episodes, students feel exposed and at risk.

The sense of risk and exposure heightens the significance these episodes hold for students so that these episodes become transformative turning points leading to changes in students' self-concepts (p. 48).

## **8.6 Emotional Scaffolding: Empathy, Peer Mentoring, Reflective Journal Writing and Time Out**

My immediate response to my students' feelings of fear and apprehension was one of empathy. I wanted to provide them with sufficient scaffolding so that they felt supported enough to begin to act, even though perhaps they did not feel they had the resources to do so. Meyer and Turner (2002), drawing on the work of others, define and elaborate upon the concept of scaffolding in the following way:

Scaffolding is an instructional process in which a teacher supports students cognitively, motivationally, and emotionally in learning while helping them to further develop autonomy. The metaphor of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) is based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), of the conceptual place between learners' current competencies and what they can achieve with the support of more knowledgeable others. Scaffolding is an inherently social process, one shared between experts and novices, parents and children, or teachers and students (p. 18).

I refer in this Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning to both emotional and cognitive scaffolding, and this may sound as if the two can be neatly compartmentalised. This is not the case. Just as students' responses comprised affective and cognitive dimensions, so too did the scaffolding I offered them. I discuss emotional scaffolding in isolation in this section simply because this was the type of scaffolding that I needed to emphasise initially, in response to students' powerful emotional responses to the task. What I learnt in the initial stages of the self-directed learning process, through reflection on my students' learning log entries, was that emotional scaffolding needed to occur before any significant learning could take place. I became aware that students needed to know that their feelings were validated before any real progress could be made. It became clear to me, as Taylor (2001) has highlighted, that

in the practise of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making. Feelings and rationality need to be placed on an equal footing, recognizing their interdependent relationship (p. 233).

King and Wright (2003), in their study of 19 participants in an Adult Basic Education classroom, reported that “respondents cited support of their classmates and teacher, respect from others, and learning from other’s experience as important to their transformation. The instructor’s patience was also explicitly mentioned numerous times” (p. 114). In the context of standing alongside my students as they worked on their self-directed learning tasks, I also became aware of the importance of providing them with emotional scaffolds. In an attempt to support my students as they experienced the disequilibrium caused by being given this challenging self-directed learning task, I first asked them to begin reflecting on what they were feeling in their learning logs. This reflective writing became an important part of the project for many students. As they wrote about their feelings, they were better able to understand them and then to move forward with their work. In turn, I responded to students’ comments by writing in their learning logs. My responses were intended to reflect an understanding of how students were feeling and to offer encouragement to them. The process of writing reflectively did far more than help students to work through their emotional responses to the task, but in the initial stages, working through their feelings in their learning logs tended to be the dominant focus and this was something I encouraged. (For more on the role of reflective writing in the transformative learning process, see Chapter 6).

At the beginning of the project, I also introduced students to the peer mentor program. Although peer mentor relationships offered students other benefits apart from emotional support, in the initial phases of the task, the primary benefit identified by many students was the peer support that it afforded them. (For more details on the affective benefits of the peer mentor program, see 5.6). Through their learning logs, in the focus group interviews and in my informal discussions with them, many students testified to the benefits associated with being able to share their feelings with their peer mentor. For many, it was with their peer mentor that they tended to feel completely free to openly discuss their feelings because often the peer mentor could identify with their emotions. Moore (1973) argues that the self-directed learner should not be thought of as “an intellectual Robinson Crusoe, castaway and shut off in self-sufficiency” (p. 669). The peer mentor relationships that my students established, whereby they adopted the roles

of both mentor and mentee, in most instances reassured them that they were not emotionally alone throughout the learning process, although control over the direction of their learning ultimately rested with each individual. Land and Jarman (1992) acknowledge the paradox that although transformation is a uniquely personal phenomenon, it is often fostered through strong, deep relationships:

Growth, change, and ultimately evolution occur as individuals, organizations, and society increase the depth of their relationships by continually broadening and strengthening their inter-dependent connections (p. 189).

In Mezirow's (1991) delineation of his ten step process of transformation, the fourth step is: "Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change" (p. 168). As my students shared their experiences with one another, the initial feeling of disequilibrium was easier to bear, and they were able to offer one another the support they needed to negotiate the remaining stages of the self-directed learning project.

Almost two months after my students were assigned this self-directed learning task, I was aware that they needed some undivided time to devote to their self-directed learning projects. The daily routine of school life, combined with their extra-curricular and social commitments, meant that they rarely had extended time in which to work on their self-directed learning projects. The tyranny of time is one of the challenges that I have continued to face as I have sought to give opportunities for students to engage in self-directed learning. Sometimes, if it is at all possible, taking time out and stepping into another geographical and mental space is what is needed. Taylor (1998), drawing on other studies into transformative learning, including Gallagher's (1997) and Kaminsky's (1997), highlights the fact that "transformative pedagogy, particularly in a group setting, requires an inordinate amount of time" (p. 53). Wiessner and Mezirow (2000), in discussing some of the findings emerging from The First National Conference on Transformative Learning, mention that one of the conference delegates, Piper, "talked about the old mansion where her Lesley College program takes place as a physical setting that invites exploration, encourages imagination and wonder, and



allows people to leave their day-to-day life settings and roles behind for a time” (p. 336). Physical environments conducive to reflection, contemplation and relaxed interaction with others can be seen to constitute the aesthetics of transformative learning. A few months after this Year 10 class had embarked on their self-directed learning projects, I managed to arrange some time out, from one Sunday afternoon until the following Tuesday afternoon, at a nearby campsite. For this time away I planned whole class sessions in which students could discuss their ideas with one another; peer mentor time; informal one-on-one discussion time with me and with one of my colleagues; time for solitary work on their project and for reflective writing; and recreational time. The time away took place on a property situated in picturesque bushland. While the students were working alone one day, I took the opportunity to journal some of my thoughts about the time away. An excerpt from my reflective writing follows:

It is clear that time is one of the keys to success in this type of self-directed learning venture. It is crucial for staff and students to have time out from their daily routines at school to engage with one another, to explore their ideas and to write. This is particularly true of a school like ours which demands so much of students, both in terms of curricular demands and extra-curricular demands. The pleasant surrounds and beautiful weather are, of course, a bonus!

The students have been fabulous. They have been particularly supportive of one another. As each student shared his or her ideas in the whole class discussion group this morning, I encouraged the rest of the group to respond/show an interest/ask questions. They did so in a most perceptive and sensitive manner. Some even suggested further reading, helpful resources, etc. (15.5.00).

As I reflect on this time away, I realise how fortunate we were to be given two full school days to devote to the learning process. Taking time to engage in reflection, in dialogue, and in enjoying the learning process is so often sacrificed in the interests of “getting through the outcomes”. When this is the case, learning is rarely transformative. Since the time away, I have given thought to ways of devoting time to these dimensions of learning *within* the chaotic timetable of the school day. It is possible, but I am still grateful for the extra time being made available to us as I sought to make this self-directed learning project a worthwhile one for the students.

The emotional scaffolding provided by students having time to share their thoughts and feelings with one another during the time away was recognised by students in their reflective journals. Cindy, who commented in her initial learning log entry that she felt scared, afraid, worried and daunted by the project, included the following comment in her first learning log entry after returning from the time away:

Group discussions were a beneficial part of the camp as they forced us to clarify our ideas in order to relate them to others. The variety of viewpoints in our class meant the discovery of angles within our topics that we had overlooked. Allocated times for writing were extremely useful to get us started. Free time with our class meant we got to know them better, making us more comfortable with discussing our writing (Learning Log: 21.5.00).

It is interesting to note that Cindy viewed the recreational time with her classmates as an important precursor to the peer mentoring sessions and whole class discussions because they enabled her to build and consolidate emotional connections with those who would later offer her help with her work.

Alan suggested that that the social and emotional dimensions of the time away were the most beneficial for him, too:

The actual thesis camp [the name the students gave to our time away] itself was good, not only because it gave a lot of us an excellent opportunity for writing, but because we all got to know each other much better. I think in all honesty that that was the more important of the two. It helped in the writing aspect by cajoling the procrastinating, indecisive majority into putting thoughts down onto paper, but I left more comfortable in the knowledge that I knew everyone in the class and was comfortable expressing myself around them, than comfortable in the knowledge that I had started my thesis.... The group discussions, while certainly the most time-consuming, were also probably the most beneficial and these were definitely one of the contributing factors to the work done on our theses (Learning Log: 23.5.00).

Throughout the time away, I conducted informal one-on-one interviews with students to find out how they were going. One of the questions I asked them when interviewing them was, "What have been the most helpful aspects of the time

away?” Nearly all of them made reference to the time spent in dialogue with one another, as this made them feel less overwhelmed. The other aspect of the time away that they focused on in these interviews was their appreciation of the time set aside for them to write, away from the usual distractions of school life.

Not all students valued the time spent with others. Interestingly, Charles, whose initial reaction to the project I described above as being resistant, wrote a lot during the time away. For the most part, however, he chose to do so in isolation. His way of protracting his resistance, whilst still technically complying with the requirement to engage in the self-directed learning task, was to shun support from others as much as he could. In his first learning log entry after returning from the time away, Charles wrote the following:

I have written a ‘mere’ two thousand words (sarcasm is intended here – really two thousand words is quite a lot), but I fear that in these two days I could have written even more with slightly different writing conditions. Peer Mentors (peeries) do not help my style of writing that much and we spent an awful lot of time with them which could have better been spent on the actual writing of the thesis.

I worked hard and well on camp and am solidly happy with the result. The reason I worked well and possibly better than other members of the class was because I went off to our cabin by myself and didn’t get distracted (Learning Log: 25.5.00).

I was pleased that Charles had at least overcome his initial resistance to embarking on the task. I suspect this was, in part, due to the fact that in his resistant state he was not receiving any reinforcement from his peers. Nevertheless, his decision to “go it alone”, rather than to open himself to support from others, meant that he was not availing himself of the type of support that may have made the experience more fulfilling for him.

So my response to my students’ emotional expressions of their experience of disequilibrium was to provide them with a range of emotional scaffolds. Through giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with me and with one another, I saw them move to a new stage in the learning process.

## 8.7 Courage, Commitment and Curiosity

After they had begun to experience the benefits of emotional scaffolding, the emotion that I most frequently observed in my students was courage. The anxiety felt by some students was not necessarily eradicated as a result of the emotional support that they experienced. Nevertheless, with the exceptions of Eric and Jodie, who left school for the reasons outlined above, all the students in this Year 10 class at least felt that they were able to begin work on their self-directed learning projects. The courage that emerged out of the initial phase of the learning process was the catalyst for tentative action on the part of the students, and this action then provided the basis for further encouragement and reassurance. In speaking of Winston Churchill, Hayward (1997) remarks, “The key to Churchill’s courage was his unbounded optimism. Only an optimist can be courageous, because courage depends on hopefulness that dangers and hazards can be overcome by bold and risky acts” (p. 115). Through providing students with the emotional scaffolding they needed in the early stages of their self-directed learning projects, they began to feel that they could face what they perceived to be the “dangers and hazards” of the experience. The challenge for me as their teacher was not to recoil in despondency as students reflected a level of anxiety or fear at the beginning of the self-directed learning process. As I stood beside them throughout the project, I came to recognise that the capacity for transformative learning was in fact *heightened* as they were pushed out of their comfort zones, provided that they also experienced the support they needed along the way.

The way my students *acted* was inextricably connected to the way they *felt* about the project. I knew that I could not expect them to broach a daunting task in a productive manner until their fear was to some degree accompanied by courage. Damasio (2000) links the process of feeling to response or action (pp. 284-285). In attempting to answer the complex question, “What are feelings for?”, he argues:

The simple process of feeling begins to give the organism *incentive* to heed the results of emoting.... The availability of feeling is also the stepping stone for the next development – *the feeling of knowing that we have feelings*. In turn, knowing is the

stepping stone for the process of planning specific and nonstereotyped responses which can either complement an emotion or guarantee that the immediate gains brought by emotion can be maintained over time, or both. In other words, “feeling” feelings extends the reach of emotions by facilitating the planning of novel and customized forms of adaptive response (pp. 284-285).

As my students began to *feel* more courageous, I also noticed that their commitment to the task increased. Rogers (1983) expresses the view that “commitment is more than a decision. It is the functioning of an individual who is searching for the directions that are emerging within himself” (p. 279). Students’ work began to gain momentum after the initial phase of emotional scaffolding and the emergence of courage within them. Chapters 5 and 6 focus in some detail on the ways in which the emotional scaffolding provided by peer mentoring and critically reflective writing benefited many students. After experiencing these benefits, many of the students also began to demonstrate greater curiosity about, or enthusiasm for, their chosen topic, and they wanted to discuss their embryonic ideas.

## **8.8 Cognitive Scaffolding and Students’ Discovery of Strategies and Personal Resources**

Once this momentum took hold, I sought to respond with enthusiasm to my students’ ideas, but also to engage in challenging dialogue with them. This dialogue was designed to stimulate them to expand their perceptions of the possibilities available to them within their areas of interest. On some occasions, this discussion was also designed to challenge their presuppositions about their sense of themselves as learners. I engaged in discussion with some students who continued to struggle with feelings of inadequacy, encouraging them to consider the basis for these feelings. Mezirow (1991) argues:

Participation in rational discourse under...ideal conditions will help adults become critically reflective of the meaning perspectives and arrive at more developmentally advanced meaning perspectives. A developmentally advanced meaning perspective is one that is:

- more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of experience
- based upon full information
- free from both internal and external coercion
- open to other perspectives and points of view
- accepting of others as equal participants in discourse
- objective and rational in assessing contending arguments and evidence
- critically reflective of presuppositions and their source and consequences, and
- able to accept an informed and rational consensus as the authority for judging conflicting validity claims (p. 78).

As I engaged in challenging dialogue with students about their self-directed learning projects, many of them demonstrated that they were “open to other perspectives and points of view”, “accepting of others as equal participants in discourse” and “critically reflective of presuppositions and their source and consequences” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 78). In addition to engaging students in this type of dialogue, that included reflective discourse, I encouraged them to challenge *one another's* ideas. At “thesis camp” and beyond, I sought to give them time with one another, in peer mentor partnerships and in a larger group, to suggest new ways of looking at their established ideas. The dialogue that emerged led to a transformation of meaning schemes for some students. At the end of the self-directed learning project, the students wrote a Peer Mentor Review of the person to whom they had been a peer mentor (and who had been one to them). These were personal accounts of the mentor’s perceptions of their mentee throughout the course of the project. Two students, Rochelle and Virginia, wrote on poems about death and dying. In Rochelle’s Peer Mentor Review on Virginia, she wrote:

We had many discussions on the poems Virginia chose, as she found it quite difficult to select only a small number. We also discussed the aspects she would be examining for her thesis. Unintentionally, we came up with different ideas for the topic area that we shared, and we found this beneficial as I could provide her with an objective opinion due to the fact that my ideas were different from hers. But at the same time, I had a similar understanding of the concepts in each poem as I had also studied the topic.

Thesis camp was a great help to Virginia as it was where she started writing her thesis, something that she found quite hard to

do. She told me that it seemed to her to be such a big task, and that it was hard to start at a particular point. Following my advice, she picked her favourite poem and got to work. This was a significant breakthrough, as once she started, she kept on going. The camp was also the place where I was able to help her analyse some of her poems as she had trouble with a couple of ideas in them.

However, by the end it became obvious that she didn't really need my help. She produced an excellent thesis, which demonstrated her skill in analysing poetry and her superb use of language. What was also good about her thesis was the fact that it enabled her to look at a larger group of poets than me. This gave her essay breadth and enabled her to cover the topic in great detail (Peer Mentor Review: 3.9.00).

In this account, it is clear that Rochelle's discussions with Virginia achieved more than merely providing her with emotional support, although this dimension is evident in Rochelle's practical suggestion that Virginia begin "such a big task" by analysing her favourite poem. In addition to this emotional support, the two of them discussed the poems that Virginia might choose for analysis and "discussed the aspects she would be examining for her thesis." Although the tone of Rochelle's account may sound a little condescending ("Following my advice..."), and may indicate that she had a lot of sway over Virginia's decision-making, this in fact was not the case. On a few occasions, I saw them engage in what could be called fiery debate over these matters. It was clear to me that Virginia's engagement in dialogue with Rochelle stimulated her to think about her ideas from new perspectives, but at no point did Virginia relinquish control over her work. At times, Virginia needed help to analyse some of the more complex lines of metaphysical poetry. Rochelle alludes to helping her with this but this help did not in anyway diminish the self-directed nature of the task, because Virginia was always responsible for the overall direction of her work.

Daloz (1986) highlights the need to strike a balance between challenging and supporting learners. Posing too much of a challenge, and too little support will lead learners to retreat, whilst providing support, without challenge, will result in learners feeling confirmed. This feeling of confirmation may not be conducive to growth. Transformative learning is best promoted through both a high level of support and a high level of challenge. As a result of the cognitive scaffolding that

my students received, they discovered the strategies and personal resources that they needed to move forward. This cognitive scaffolding enabled them to shift their perspectives (about themselves as learners and about the issues with which they were grappling) to ones that were “more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 78).

To argue that at this point the focus shifted completely from emotional scaffolding to cognitive scaffolding would be misleading. Throughout the self-directed learning process, my students needed to experience ongoing emotional support, because I noticed that for some it was at this point, not earlier, that their spirits started to flag. In this stage of the process, just as students began to gain confidence and to feel comfortable, the process of engaging in dialogue unsettled some of them once more. Mezirow (1991) expounds his view of the purpose of emancipatory education in the following way: “Its goal is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing (*how* they are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, acting – a reflection on the process) and beyond this to an awareness of the *reasons why* they experience as they do and to action based on these insights” (p. 197). Moving to this level of questioning *why* they held certain views was challenging for some students, and some never really succeeded in moving beyond their initial conceptions of *how* they were perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling and acting. Virginia did, however, manage to move to the point where she questioned why she held various perspectives. This is evident in her final Reflection Statement, or retrospective account of her experience of the self-directed learning task:

My perceptions of the world, or certainly the world of literature, have also been altered because of this thesis.... I have learnt that everything must be supported with evidence and I need to consider not just what I think about things, but why I think them. This is probably the “moral” that I learnt from completing this thesis, and it is definitely the advice that I will retain throughout my education and career (Reflection Statement: 5.9.00).



## **8.9 Not a Sprint but a Marathon: Perseverance and Determination**

Whilst the level of intellectual stimulation at this point brought satisfaction to some students, I also noticed that others began to experience more negative emotions. As they began to reflect more critically upon their ideas, I noticed the emergence of certain confusions, ambiguities, concerns and new anxieties. In exploring the forces of change, Fullan (1993) observes:

The more accustomed one becomes at dealing with the unknown, the more one understands that creative breakthroughs are always preceded by periods of cloudy thinking, confusion, exploration, trial and stress; followed by periods of excitement, and growing confidence as one pursues purposeful change, or copes with unwanted change (p. 17).

For some of my students, their stress flowed from the simple realisation that they still had a way to go; that the journey was a marathon, not a sprint. At this stage in the process, I was confronted with the question of how I should respond to those students who, having been offered emotional support, nevertheless hit inner barricades of self-doubt and despair that seemed to them to be insurmountable. Arnold (2005) speaks of this loss of hope in the following way: “Hope is a vulnerable affect susceptible to change. What replaces it when it ceases to sustain expectation and performance? Utter despair and paralysis” (p. 128). I empathised with my students’ feelings, knowing that I had experienced similar feelings myself at different points in my own self-directed learning experience of engaging in this research. I encouraged those students who were experiencing intellectual drought, emotional despondency, physical fatigue or disillusionment to express these feelings in their reflective learning logs and to honour any tentative stirrings within them to make progress. I was mindful of Arnold’s (2005) view “that endurance works because it integrates resistance with progression, rather than isolating it in some psychic space where it continues to create mischief” (p. 128).

I also knew, from experience, that breaking down a big task into small, manageable sections is not just an organisational tool, but a way of coping with the stress of feeling overwhelmed. As Bruner (1961) states:

Organized persistence is a maneuver for protecting our fragile cognitive apparatus from overload. The child who has flooded himself with disorganized information from unconnected hypotheses will become discouraged and confused sooner than the child who has shown a certain cunning in his strategy of getting information – a cunning whose principal component is the recognition that the value of information is not simply in getting it but in being able to carry it. The persistence of the organized child stems from his knowledge of how to organize questions in cycles, how to summarize things to himself, and the like (p. 25).

When my students were overloaded, I sought to help them discover ways of breaking down the task and finally, in an attempt to encourage perseverance in my students, I suggested that they focus afresh on their desired goal. In this context, Damasio's (2000) notions of "autobiographical memory" (p. 224) and "memories of an anticipated future" (p.217) were useful to me:

The idea each of us constructs of ourself, the image we gradually build of who we are physically and mentally, of where we fit socially, is based on autobiographical memory over years of experience and is constantly subject to remodeling....

The changes which occur in the autobiographical self over an individual lifetime are not due only to the remodeling of the lived past that takes place consciously and unconsciously, but also to the laying down and remodeling of the anticipated future. I believe that a key aspect of self evolution concerns the balance of two influences: the lived past and the anticipated future. Personal maturity means that memories of the future we anticipate for the time that may lie ahead carry a large weight in the autobiographical self of each moment. The memories of the scenarios that we conceive as desires, wishes, goals, and obligations exert a pull on the self of each moment. No doubt they also play a part in the remodeling of the lived past, consciously and unconsciously, and in the creation of the person we conceive ourselves to be, moment by moment (Damasio, 2000, pp. 224-225).

With this in mind, I encouraged my students to set their gaze on a positive anticipated future, because in this Year 10 class, there was no "lived past" experience of a self-directed learning task to which they could refer. The memories of this anticipated future could then "exert a pull on the self of each moment" (Damasio, 2000, p. 225).

## 8.10 Completion of the Project and Celebration of Students' Achievements

After students pushed through these feelings of despondency, by demonstrating perseverance, the final stages of the learning cycle formed a celebration of, and reflection upon, the whole learning experience. Students managed to complete their long essays (or theses) and they were keen to celebrate their achievements. At this point, I arranged to have their work published in-house in an anthology. Each student received a copy of this anthology at the presentation evening. This presentation evening took the form of a creative book launch, at which students presented, collaboratively or individually, on various aspects of the self-directed learning process. Some spoke about their peer mentoring relationship, some read extracts from their work, some spoke about the value of writing reflectively in their learning logs, whilst others spoke about the research process and the ideas that they had discovered about their literary area of interest. The evening was attended by the students' families, friends and interested others. I felt it was important for the culmination of the students' achievements to take the form of a celebration. A perfunctory pat on the back or "well done" would not have been a sufficient recognition of their efforts. The evening was designed to showcase students' expertise and for many of the students it was also a celebration of their achievement of accomplishing a goal that, at the inception of the project, they had thought was out of their reach. Ertmer and Newby (1996) define expert learners as "those successful individuals who approach academic tasks with confidence, diligence, and resourcefulness" (p. 1). In this sense, many of my students were celebrating the *discovery* of expertise, realised through the process of undertaking a major, self-directed learning project. Ertmer and Newby (1996) go on to describe the hallmarks of expert learners, highlighting that they "display planfulness, control, and reflection; they are aware of the knowledge and skills they possess, or are lacking, and use appropriate strategies to actively implement or acquire them" (p. 1). This is the type of expertise I observed my students developing as they moved through the stages of the self-directed learning process.

## 8.11 Relief, Pride and Satisfaction

According to students' responses in their learning logs and in focus group interviews, the feelings that they experienced at the completion of the task included relief, pride and satisfaction. Cindy's sense of relief is clear in her Reflection Statement, or retrospective reflection on the whole project, written after she had submitted her work:

The best thing about my final product was that it was a final product. It was complete. I had survived and succeeded in finishing it. I had had doubts as to whether completion would ever be achieved. I was reasonably happy with the final product, however with a work of this magnitude I could have developed it for months more and never been completely satisfied (Reflection Statement: 4.9.00).

Although Cindy expresses the view that given more time she could have produced a better piece of work, she is clearly relieved that, in spite of her doubts, she "succeeded in finishing it".

Other students, like Roger, focused on their feeling of pride at having accomplished something so substantial: "I wrote just over 4 000 words and I'm really proud of myself on that. I never thought I'd ever get that much written" (Reflection Statement: 6.9.00). As with Cindy's comments in her Reflection Statement, Roger contrasts his feelings about the task when he began it, with his feelings at the end. For both students, the feelings of relief and satisfaction at the end of the project stemmed from the fact that they accomplished something that they doubted they could achieve when they began.

In Kevin's Reflection Statement, the juxtaposition of his feelings at the beginning and end of the project is also clear. These feelings are described in the context of his assessment of the value of the project as a whole:

Originally I was fairly pessimistic about the thesis for this year but now I am very glad that we put in the hours that I originally dreaded giving up. I knew from the outset that this project would be a major time consumer and a huge task to complete and it has been this exactly. I do, however, feel a sense of achievement, as

well as relief to know that we have finally completed this piece of work (Reflection Statement: 9.9.00).

It is interesting to note that Charles, who was highly resistant to the task at the outset, also expressed in his Reflection Statement “a feeling of accomplishment and achievement” upon completion of the task:

It was a challenge, but the feeling after I printed that last full stop, that final speck of ink, was something I will never forget – or I may in fact forget it, I’m not sure; we’ll see. Anyway, it was a feeling of accomplishment and achievement. Against all odds, I had overcome the strains and hardships of thesis writing and had compiled a piece of over 6 000 words (Reflection Statement: 5.9.00).

## **8.12 Narratives of Perspective Transformation**

Up to this point, I have identified some of the key feelings and actions of my students as they undertook a challenging self-directed learning task. In the last stage of the process, they spent some time reflecting on the whole process, and this period of reflection culminated in a written Reflection Statement. For some students, this period of reflection elicited a realisation that they had experienced a perspective transformation, most commonly about how they perceived themselves as learners. As their teacher, this moment in the process was especially rewarding.

In this section, my intention is to present two narratives of perspective transformation, one from a boy and one from a girl, based on their experience of this Year 10 self-directed learning task. The basis for the presentation of these narratives is the comments these students made in the focus group interviews that I conducted when they were in Year 12, two years after they embarked on this Year 10 task. Their comments were made in response to Question 5 of the focus group questions, which I gave to them in written form and articulated verbally at the start of this section of the recorded interview:

Can you trace for me the journey of one of your self-directed learning tasks undertaken with me last year?

How did you feel at the beginning?

Did anything change as you progressed? If so, what?  
What were the key moments for you?  
How did you feel at the end?  
How would you sum up the whole experience in terms of the impact it had on you?

I phrased this question for the majority of students in the class who I had only been teaching since they began Year 11, the year before. The two narratives of transformation below, however, are of students who were also in my Year 10 class the year before that. When I posed the question for the focus group interviews, I expected that they, too, would prefer to comment on their more recent experiences of self-directed learning in Year 11. I was wrong. Both of these students asked for permission to talk, instead, about their first experience of self-directed learning with me when they were in Year 10, arguing that this was the most significant experience for them.

In response to the above question, then, Alan began to describe his Year 10 experience:

**Alan:** Can I use the Year 10 one instead, because that's the biggest one for me and so probably the most relevant?

**Me:** Of course.

**Alan:** Um, at the beginning, I'd never really done anything like it before and I was more than a little apprehensive. I mean it's really – it's a vastly different question to have to do a substantial composition where the level has to be sophisticated the whole way through than just doing, you know, one of the little essays that you've come across before, where you could pretty much get away with, you know, a lot of superfluous stuff as long as there were a few bits and pieces scattered the way through. So I was really nervous, because I was not sure how I was going to go about, or how I was going to handle it, and you know, how to manage my time and all that sort of stuff, so yeah, probably nervous and apprehensive.

As I progressed, I grew a lot more confident, not only in what I was writing but in my ability to write, you know, further compositions of that sort of nature. At the beginning I was really nervous and I was apprehensive, and as I progressed I started to realise, "Wait a minute. I've had the grounding in this, I've had the background, I believe in myself that I have the skills and the talents required to do this. And so I grew a lot more confident,

and that enabled me in the end to feel free to explore more and have more fun with it because I wasn't so worried about failing or meeting the criteria.

**Me:** Is this midway through the process that you started to feel these things, or is this by the end of it, so that for future tasks you felt this way?

**Alan:** Well a bit of both, actually. Towards the end, definitely, but even as you started, once you get that first initial draft done and you start to refine a little bit and you polish it, you start to get that real sense of satisfaction and feeling of achievement that you can do this and that you have put together something quite substantial, so especially at the end, but you do start to feel it through it as well. You start thinking, "Yeah, I can do this."

**Me:** And so the impact it had on you was to make you feel more like you could tackle that kind of thing in the future?

**Alan:** Yeah, yeah definitely.

**Me:** Would it have – would the impact stretch beyond how you would feel about embarking on similar tasks? Would it have an impact in other areas of your life perhaps?

**Alan:** I can't say I've thought about it in that way but as you mention it, I can see how – again I think it comes back to a whole issue of confidence – confidence in yourself and confidence in your abilities, and I think something like that is something that really tests that confidence and tests those abilities and when you come out at the end of it seeing that, you know, you have done well and that you have succeeded and that you are, you know, really quite proud of what you've got at the end of it, then I think that does have more far-reaching implications than just English. I think it extends all around to your schooling as a whole and to yourself – that you know that you have the necessary skills to get you through what you want in life.

**Me:** Was there anything that I did or that was set up for you in terms of the way I structured the task that helped you get over the initial feelings of nervousness and apprehension that you articulated?

**Alan:** Um, one was the peer mentoring thing that you set up fairly early on. That gave you a chance to, you know, talk to your mentor about how you were feeling, your worries about it. You know, you could say, "Well what have you gone and done? Well this is what I've gone and done," and it sort of made the whole process a lot less nerve-wracking because you could see how other people were going and you could gauge how you were

going against them, and you got a feel of where you were in relation to where things had to be and that was good.

And you were also very good when it came to the checking out where we were up to and how we were going and you weren't too strict on it. You didn't say, "OK, why haven't you got the draft done to this many words, you know, when you said you would?" You took into account, you know, different people's circumstances and what they were doing, and how they were feeling, and were quite – not lenient, in a sense, but understanding of different people's requirements and that was quite a boost in that I didn't feel that it was just pressure to get something in, I felt like I could keep going with my thoughts and feelings on it, even if it wasn't written down as such. So that was good.

**Me:** That was helpful. Thank you, Alan.

In this description, Alan clearly articulates his transition from feelings of nervousness and apprehension about completing a substantial, sophisticated response, to the point where he experienced a "real sense of satisfaction and achievement". The learning experience was transformative for Alan because his perceptions of his ability to undertake self-directed learning changed dramatically. He began with doubts about his ability to successfully complete a major self-directed learning task, and he ended with the realisation, forged through experience, that he *was* capable of completing such a task.

Alan's growth in self-confidence occurred as he was undertaking the project, so that as he achieved significant milestones along the way, he felt "free to explore more and have more fun" with the project. At the end of the project, he felt more confident about tackling similar tasks in the future. His actions corroborated this. He did, in fact, elect to undertake English Extension 2 in Year 12 for his Higher School Certificate (leaving examination). In doing so, he embarked on a substantial work of literary criticism that was ultimately marked by external examiners and contributed to his final grade that determined his university entrance score. I was his supervising teacher for this project and was aware that Alan began the project with a strong awareness of his ability to successfully complete such a task. This awareness was clearly a result of his past experiences of such tasks. Alan worked diligently and confidently on his major self-directed



piece of literary criticism in his final year and ultimately received the exceptional result of 49/50 for it.

In the focus group interview, Alan also highlights that the Year 10 self-directed learning project tested his confidence in his own abilities. His successful completion of the project made him feel “really quite proud” and revealed to him that he possessed “the necessary skills” to get through what he wanted to in life. The experience stretched beyond the world of academia, unearthing for Alan a more fundamental realisation: that he was capable of discovering the skills and personal resources needed to reach previously unattained goals that might initially feel daunting or beyond his reach.

In the focus group interviews that I conducted, a growth in confidence, identified by Alan as the primary legacy of his Year 10 self-directed learning project, was also the change most frequently identified by other students when they were questioned about past self-directed learning projects. The interview with Alan highlights his awareness of this change and of its potential implications in other areas of his life. It became clear to me that the increase in confidence experienced by Alan and several other students emerged as a result of a redefined conception of themselves as individuals capable of directing their own learning, rather than as learners needing constant direction from me as their teacher.

Earlier in the chapter, I explored Naomi’s initial reactions to the Year 10 project, comparing her initial learning log reflection, written at the time, with the comments she made in the focus group interview when she was in Year 12. Here I quote her extended response in the focus group interview, which highlights her perceptions of the changes she experienced from the beginning of the project to the end of it:

**Naomi:** I’ll talk about the Year 10 task. At the start, I felt like really little, and I felt, hang on a minute, I’m a little baby. I don’t deserve this. I can’t believe she’s making me do this. I was mad with you for making me do this.... I was really scared. It was, what’s she going to think if I don’t do well? So I’ll have to strive to do well.

It was all right because I got on to it when we went away for three days and we didn't have to think about anything else. I started to write.

I was pretty apprehensive through it all because I didn't know what other people would be turning out, but then it was relief and I could see the point to it all. I could see that it had helped me. I was more confident. And now I've chosen to do 4 unit [English Extension 2, Year 12 Higher School Certificate course]. So at first I was mad at you for making me do it, and now I'm actually choosing to do it, so that shows a bit of a change, I guess (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

Naomi's image of herself as a baby who was being made to undertake a self-directed learning task that she didn't feel ready for, is contrasted with her view of herself two years later as a confident individual making an autonomous decision to undertake another major self-directed learning project. Brookfield (2000), in the tradition of ideology critique, understands one of the purposes of critical reflection to be "to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our lives easier but that actually end up working against our own best long-term interests" (p. 131). Through undertaking this challenging, self-directed learning task, Naomi began to question the assumption that being spoon-fed, like a baby, was the learning practice best suited to her long-term interests. The experience of successfully engaging in self-directed learning led her to revise this assumption. Her reflections here reveal a significant transformation in her attitude to learning. Naomi's experiences transformed her to the point where she felt that self-directed learning was helpful to her, rather than a punishment ("I don't deserve this.") As I reflect on Naomi's comments, I am aware that only her willingness to *experience* the unknown and to push through her feeling of fear could have brought about such a change in her. I could not have *said* anything at the time that she embarked on her first self-directed learning project that could possibly have convinced her that she *would* experience such a transformation. Such transformation occurred only as a result of her lived experience for, as Kathleen Taylor (2000) observes, "if provided appropriate supports the challenge to actively explore new ways of doing and being" tends "to move learners toward new ways of thinking and knowing" (p. 163).

At the end of the Year 10 project, Naomi composed a Reflection Statement, in which she looked back on the project from its inception to its completion:

At first glance, writing a thesis seemed a very overwhelming and daunting task. The required length of this task made the whole thing seem even more impossible. But, through the process of writing this thesis, I have come to realise that even the largest of things can be achieved with perseverance, determination and by taking things one step at a time. When I first discovered that our class had to write theses, I didn't even know what the word meant. I had never written a thesis before and I hadn't perfected the art of writing an essay, so I thought that writing a thesis would definitely be too hard for me. But, now that my thesis is complete, I have come to realise that it was not such a difficult thing to do, with the help of my peer mentors, Charles and Roger, my parents and my teacher. Although the whole process took a considerable amount of time, I now feel that it was very beneficial and worthwhile.

Since we were first given the task, I have changed my thoughts about it numerous times. In the beginning, I was nervous and anxious to start the assignment. About a quarter of the way through it, I felt that I was not making any developments or progressing, so therefore it became less interesting and I found it hard to get motivated. Then when I started *The Truman Show* section of the thesis, I became more focused and interested in my assignment. At this stage, most of my work was completed.

I have learnt many things from writing my thesis and I believe that it has changed me for the better. I am now more confident about writing long pieces of work and feel that I can now convey my ideas in a clear way. I also have learnt more about world issues such as communism and freedom of speech. Because I have learnt these new things, I can now apply these skills to other areas of my English work and other subjects (Reflection Statement: 28.8.00).

This Reflection Statement supports the comments that Naomi made two years later in the focus group interview. Naomi acknowledges that she changed throughout the project, from feeling overwhelmed, daunted, nervous and anxious at the beginning, to the point where she came to realise that through perseverance and determination she was able to successfully complete the project. By the end of the project, Naomi had developed an appreciation of the self-directed learning project and came to realise "that it was very beneficial and worthwhile". Naomi documents the emotional vicissitudes of the project. Nevertheless, like Alan, she

also acknowledges that the transformation of her perception of herself as a learner would inevitably impact on her future learning experiences. ("Because I have learnt these new things, I can now apply these skills to other areas of my English work and other subjects.") As she mentioned in the focus group interview, like Alan, Naomi went on to embark on a major critical response as part of the English Extension 2 course when she was undertaking her Higher School Certificate in Year 12. She, too, obtained 49/50 for her work, a mark she would no doubt have deemed out of her reach when she embarked on her first self-directed learning project at the beginning of Year 10. Cohen and Piper (2000) highlight the importance of transformation manifesting itself in action: "A great challenge in conducting research on transformative learning is to get beyond language and be able to spot transformation in action rather than through verbal or written responses" (p. 225). Verbal and written responses are surely illuminating as well, but Naomi's decision to undertake a major self-directed learning task that would count toward her University Admissions Index (the mark used by New South Wales universities to determine those who will be admitted to tertiary courses and those who will not) is an example of an action that testifies to her transformed view of learning. It demonstrates her sense of a movement from feeling the need to be closely directed in her learning, to an increase in personal power. It is interesting to note that other studies have also identified an increase in personal power (Hunter, 1980; Pierce, 1986; Pope, 1996; Schlesinger, 1983; Scott, 1991; Sveinunggaard, 1993; Turner, 1986; Van Nostrand, 1992) and the manifestation of courage (Lucas, 1994; Neuman, 1996) as characteristics of transformation (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 297).

### **8.13 Moving Forward: A Spiral, Not a Cycle**

My recognition that some students had experienced transformation provoked further thought within me about the nature of the next self-directed learning task that I could plan for them. I knew that this could not begin immediately. The students needed time to recover. However, I was also conscious that this process should not be an end in itself, but that it should be built upon in ways that may foster further transformation in the students. I wanted the initial experience to serve as a springboard to a new self-directed learning experience and for this

reason, I envisaged the process of potentially transformative self-directed learning as a spiral, not a cycle (see Figure 8.1). A cycle would imply a repetition of the process, and whilst I did envisage a repetition of the stages, the model of a spiral better captures the idea of students looping or spiralling upwards to greater heights, beyond their previous accomplishments. I imagined that in order to foster further transformative learning, each subsequent self-directed learning task would need to generate a new disequilibrium within the students, stretching them beyond their new comfort zones.

Due to the pressures that began to impinge on my students and me after this Year 10 task (the lead up to yearly examinations, the examinations themselves and then the marking process) I did not initiate another task of this nature until the following year. I did so with my Year 11 English class, but only six of the students who were in my Year 10 class were also in this class. This meant, of course, that there was no guarantee that the other students would experience a self-directed task in the following year. It would depend upon who was teaching them.

In this Year 11 class my plans were, to some extent, shaped by the fact that students were now working towards Higher School Certificate (external leaving) examinations at the end of Year 12. The Preliminary Higher School Certificate course takes place in Year 11. The time pressure arising from the need to “get through the content” was more obvious than in Year 10 and the program was more prescriptive. As a result, I decided to contract the length of the self-directed learning tasks that I set the students in this class and to ensure that they were more closely connected with the curriculum. The first self-directed learning task the students embarked upon in this Year 11 class was based on study of Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*. I explained to the class that I would be editing a journal called *The Journal of Academic Excellence* and that I wanted them to submit a two thousand word article of criticism, to be included in the journal, that was in some way related to our study of Miller’s play. As with the Year 10 task, an integral component of this self-directed learning process involved students choosing their own area of exploration and eventually their own topic. Later in the year, we studied a range of texts around the topic “Journey”. In this context, I

asked students to complete a two thousand word creative composition that in some way explored the notion of “journey” and that also showed a degree of experimentation with narrative voice. With both projects, the parameters were still sufficiently broad to provide students with the scope to choose a unique topic and to exercise control over their work. From the Year 10 project I retained, with some modifications, the peer mentoring program (see Chapter 5) and the requirement that students reflect on the learning process in their learning logs (see Chapter 6). (For more on my Year 11 students’ self-directed learning and writing, see Chapter 7).

I carried all my Year 11 students through to Year 12, with the exception of Belinda, who left the class mid-way through Year 11. In the focus group interviews that I conducted when these Year 11 students embarked upon Year 12, many of them spoke of a growth in self-confidence as being one of the key results of these self-directed learning projects. Again there was evidence of perspective transformation that reflected similar shifts to those experienced by the students who undertook the Year 10 task. In an excerpt from one of these focus group interviews, in response to the question, Can you trace for me the journey of one of your self-directed major works done in this class last year?, the shift in David’s perception of his ability to tackle work of this nature in the future is clear:

**David:** When I did the long essay on *The Crucible*, I hadn’t really had much experience with independent learning big tasks like this sort of thing. I found it hard to define a good topic for myself.... I could think of a few broad areas, but it was hard to bring it into a nutshell. Once I got a topic it was really good because I had my peer mentor, James, who could help me with my idea.

**Me:** How did you feel at the beginning of the task?

**David:** I was quite happy. That changed. After five or six weeks, I was all over the place...very frustrated with myself because I couldn’t get on with it and um, yeah, feeling overwhelmed because a whole lot of other people were well and truly under way with theirs. By the time I got it done, I felt relief and very satisfied because it was a big thing and I knew that I’d struggled with it.

After that, the Term 2 task was much easier to get started on and also I forced myself to get going earlier because I knew the problems I'd faced when I had taken ages to get a topic. With subsequent projects I felt more easy because I knew I'd successfully completed one already (Focus Group Interview: 8.2.02).

Contrary to the frequently expressed reaction of fear and apprehension at the beginning of the project, David said that he felt "quite happy". Nevertheless, through his account of events in this interview, it is clear that his experience was actually not so different from others; it was just the timing of his feelings that was different. After "five or six weeks", he began to feel "all over the place", "frustrated" and "overwhelmed". At the end, he "felt relief and very satisfied". His attitude to subsequent projects of this nature reflected a shift. He "felt more easy" about them, and started earlier on them, because he had learnt from his experience that he may struggle to discover a suitable topic.

Several students from this class elected to undertake English Extension 2 the following year, when they were in Year 12, for their Higher School Certificate. As indicated previously, this course requires students to undertake a substantial, self-directed Major Work that may take the form of a critical, creative, or interpretive composition, or a combination of these. The tenth and final step in the process of transformation delineated by Mezirow (1991) is: "A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (p. 169). The decision to undertake, of their own volition, a challenging project of such magnitude, reflected that the new perspective (of their confident belief in their capacity to handle such a task) was being acted upon in the lives of these students. A greater test, and one that both they and I can only speculate about, is the extent to which their transformative learning experiences may shape the choices made by these students when they leave school, and throughout their adult lives.

Where possible, I have sought to provide my students with the opportunity to undertake more than one self-directed learning task. In my experience, as they complete one task and move on to the next, students spiral beyond their previous experience, provided that they are sufficiently challenged and stretched in their new endeavour. The difficulty arises that from year to year, as students move

from one teacher to the next, there is no guarantee that this spiralling will continue. Faculty co-ordinators are in a position to suggest that all teachers in a given faculty seek to provide self-directed learning opportunities for their students in each year group. It is, perhaps, more difficult to ensure that these tasks are facilitated sensitively and effectively. Staff professional development in this area may well be the key. Personally, I believe I have only learnt how to more effectively facilitate self-directed learning tasks through experience and through reflection upon that experience. Through analysing the self-directed learning experiences of my students, I have discovered ways to modify and adapt my pedagogical approach to the facilitation of such tasks, and I continue to do so.

### **8.14 The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning**

As a result of my experience facilitating the self-directed learning tasks of my students, I have become convinced of the potential for transformation that such tasks provide. When my students engaged in self-directed learning projects, they experienced a range of emotions and I sought to respond to these in ways that I thought would be helpful to them. The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning began with my pedagogical decision to set a self-directed learning task that required students to abandon familiar learning landscapes, controlled primarily by others, in favour of previously unexplored territory, determined and controlled primarily by them. This decision was a risky one, as it generated a sense of disequilibrium in most students. As students were pushed outside their comfort zones, they generally felt anxious, fearful and overwhelmed, but as they began to take control of their own learning, most of the time they discovered the strategies and personal resources needed to meet the challenges they faced. Through the provision of emotional scaffolds, students began to feel the courage needed to persevere through further feelings of inadequacy to the completion of the project. Engaging in reflective discourse also contributed to the learning process by extending students to the point where they considered not only *what* they were thinking and feeling, but *why* they were experiencing various thoughts and feelings. The celebration of students' achievements at the completion of the project was significant. I was, however, aware that the completion of each project should not be an end in itself but should function as a catalyst for spiralling into



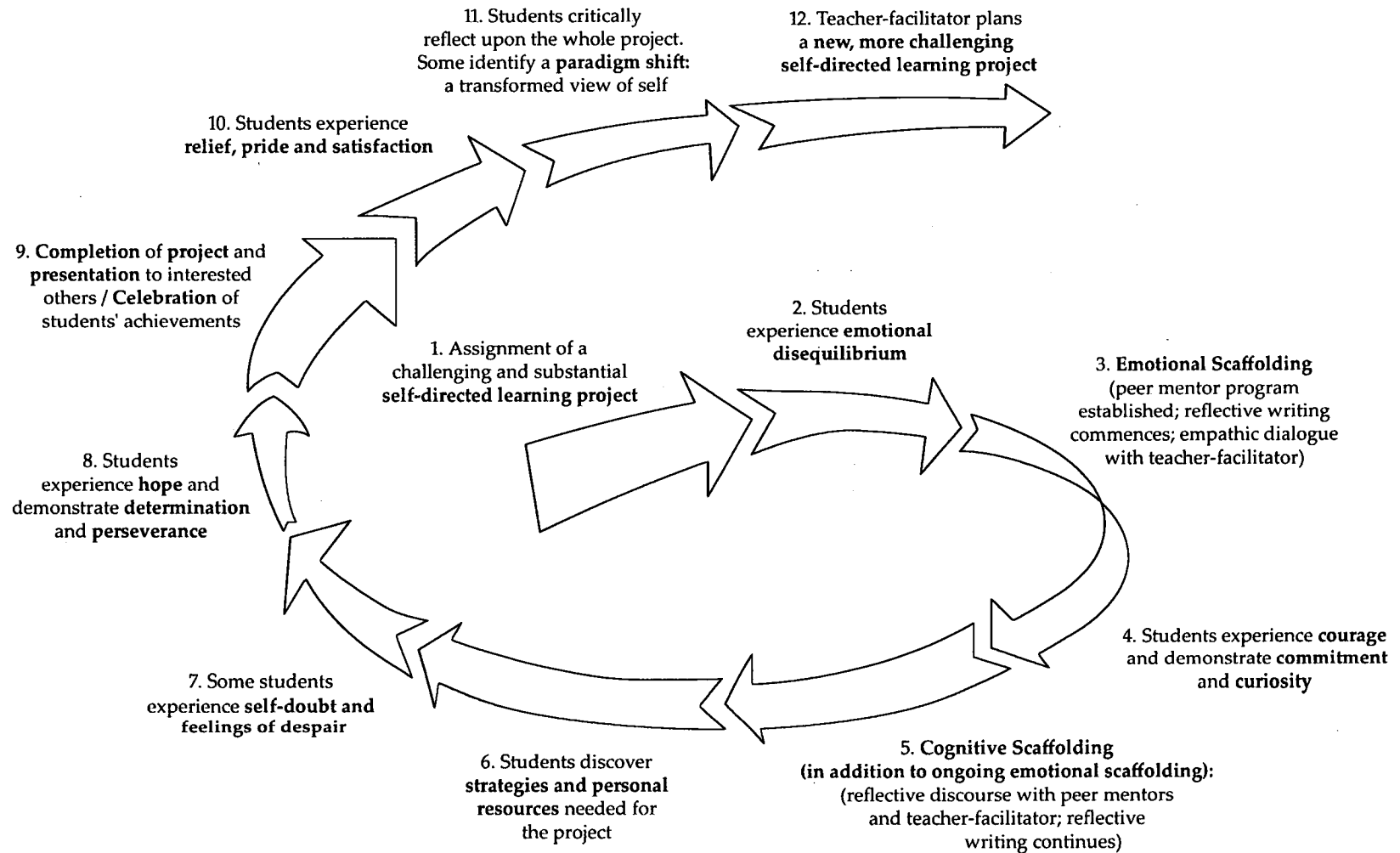


Figure 8.1: The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning

future potentially transformative self-directed learning experiences (see Figure 8.1)

### **8.15 Transformative Self-Directed Learning: An Exciting and Rewarding Experience**

Some of the most exciting and rewarding experiences for me as a teacher have been when my students have undergone a perspective transformation as a result of their self-directed learning experiences. As students acknowledge that they have grown in confidence because they have achieved things they never thought possible, and as they integrate and embody a transformed sense of themselves as learners, the fruits of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy are experienced. Rogers (1983) encapsulates my own feelings associated with this phenomenon when he states:

When I have been able to transform a group – and here I mean all members of a group, myself included – into a community of learners, then the excitement has been almost beyond belief. To free curiosity; to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests; to unleash the sense of inquiry; to open everything to questioning and exploration; to recognize that everything is in the process of change – here is an experience I can never forget. I cannot always achieve it in groups with which I am associated, but when it is partially or largely achieved, then it becomes a never-to-be forgotten group experience. Out of such a context arise true students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate but ever-changing balance between what is presently known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future (p. 120).

Self-directed learning involves a willingness, on the part of the educator and of learners, to take risks. These risks are mitigated by scaffolding, in a variety of forms, that enables learners to feel secure enough to embrace the unknown. The excitement and satisfaction experienced by learners as they experience a transformed sense of self, when they accomplish a goal they previously thought was beyond their reach, provides a ringing endorsement for this type of learning.

## **Chapter 9**

# **Spiralling into the Future: Conclusions, Implications for Pedagogical Practice and Suggestions for Further Research**

*And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.*

*‘Four Quartets’, T.S. Eliot*

### **9.1 The Nature of Transformative Learning and Transformative Pedagogy in a High School English Context**

In many respects, seeking to articulate the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy is like trying to express the nature of love, in that the expression of its nature is inevitably a reduction of the phenomenon itself. And this is further complicated by the fact that the experience of it is different for different people. Nevertheless, what I have sought to do through my research is to examine, describe and analyse some of the dimensions of the learning process and of my pedagogy that have been significant in fostering transformation in some of my students. Transformation implies a significant internal paradigm shift. Most commonly, I saw this paradigm shift occur in my students in relation to their perceptions of themselves. When articulating their experiences of transformation, students often expressed that the overriding change for them as a result of their learning involved a movement from self-doubt about their capacities as learners to a new position of self-confidence. Where they used to question their capacities as learners, they came to more strongly believe in their innate abilities. Where they used to feel fearful, anxious and overwhelmed, they reached a point where they felt more positive and confident. As students’ perceptions of themselves (as learners and, more broadly, as individuals) were transformed, these changes were revealed in a myriad of ways that were observable to me in their future learning experiences. Students themselves expressed an awareness of these changes, in their learning logs, in conversations with one another and with me, and in focus group interviews. One of the changes experienced by students was an increase in

their capacity for critical reflection and metacognition (evident in their reflective writing). But there were other manifestations of transformation. These included: openness to new ways of seeing the world (evident in their thoughtful personal responses to literature); an increased capacity to think, speak and write metaphorically; a tendency to rely less heavily on external authorities in the learning process; increased engagement in reflective discourse in the classroom; an increased capacity to empathically engage in the learning processes experienced by others; and increased self-confidence when approaching challenging self-directed learning tasks.

Not all students who formed the basis of this study experienced transformative learning. For those who did, transformative learning involved learning processes that resulted in peak experiences that changed their frames of reference and their future approaches to learning. Clearly, in addition to these transformative learning experiences, there were many simple learning experiences that did not result in transformation. I would argue that this is desirable because the emotional intensity, energetic interaction and focused critical self-reflection required for transformative learning to occur cannot be sustained at all times. As Arnold (2005) suggests, “not all learning experiences will be cognitively complex or emotionally powerful.... It is an important part of an educator’s expertise to have a vision of a vast range of learning experiences from the simple to the profound, the mundane to the transformative...” (p. 12). This study has sought to demonstrate that whilst teaching and learning for transformation may not be sustained at all times, certain learning contexts and pedagogical approaches can be seen to heighten the possibility of transformation in students.

In the following sections, I summarise in more detail the conclusions I have drawn about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy in a high school English context, incorporating discussion of the findings relevant to the related research questions outlined in Chapter 1:

- What are the hallmarks of transformative learning?

- What is the role of relationships – between students and between students and a teacher – in fostering transformative learning?
- What enabling conditions, contexts and pedagogical approaches may trigger and foster transformation? How might I seek to foster transformative learning in my students through transformative pedagogy?

## **9.2 The Importance of Dialogic Learning in the Transformative Learning Process**

In Chapters 4 and 5, my research affirmed that one facet of the nature of transformative learning is that it occurs through relationships fostered in dialogic learning contexts. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the critical reflection and reflective discourse necessary for perspective transformation is triggered by the interaction with others that occurs in a dialogic classroom. Reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000) is not the only type of dialogue that emerges in a dialogic classroom, nor would it be desirable for this to be the case. An atmosphere of trust and respect conducive to transformative learning is also fostered through banter and freedom of expression of all sorts, not just of the type that might constitute reflective discourse. Nevertheless, in the dialogic classrooms that formed the basis of this study, I sought to model reflective discourse and, as a result, students began to engage in this discourse as well. In a dialogic classroom, ideas are formed and re-formed through interaction with others and this flexibility of thought fosters learners who are aware of the importance of critical reflection and self-reflection in the learning process.

This study has also demonstrated that dialogic learning of the type that may be potentially transformative is sometimes very confronting for those involved. It is not just the positive aspects of relationships that are brought to the surface in dialogic learning contexts. The competitive dimensions of human nature and the emotional insecurities of individuals can work against attempts to foster supportive learning communities conducive to transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) outlines “a set of optimal conditions for participation in rational discourse”

(p. 77) but this study shows that these ideal conditions do not always exist in a dialogic classroom. Furthermore, the assumption that discourse is ever simply rational has been called into question by this study.

The confronting dimensions of dialogic learning highlight the need for the educator to sensitively manage the dialogic classroom and to demonstrate what Eisner (1979) describes as artistry (pp. 154-160) and what van Manen (1982b) terms “pedagogic competence” (p. 291). The educator’s awareness that transformative learning may be confronting and his or her attempts to demonstrate artistic leadership are important dimensions of transformative pedagogy. In dialogic learning contexts, transformative pedagogy involves willingness on the part of the educator to take risks and to encourage risk-taking in his or her students.

In Chapter 5, I explored the ways in which peer mentor relationships may foster transformative learning. In these relationships, as in a whole-class learning context, dialogue is again the key to fostering the emotional climate in which critical reflection might occur. This study revealed that transformative learning is fostered through learners establishing relationships with those who are confronting similar challenges. In Hunter’s (1980) study of “the learning process of people who radically changed their nutritional beliefs and practices”, she found that “developing relationships with like-minded individuals became essential for the transformative process” (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 307). In Hunter’s study, individuals who wished to move to a new perspective, or to sustain this new perspective, formed associations with others who shared that perspective (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 307). In my study, the importance of students establishing relationships with like-minded others was, for some of them, an important *precursor* to any steps towards transformation. In the context of facing the cognitive and affective challenges associated with a major self-directed learning project, the value of a peer who might be used as a sounding board was affirmed. The affective benefits of peer mentor relationships included support, comfort, reassurance, encouragement and empathy. For many students, these emotional scaffolds provided them with the courage to critically reflect, not only on the subject matter before them, but also on the ways they viewed themselves as

learners. In the context of these supportive dialogic relationships, students developed their capacity for metacognition that in turn developed the potential for them to experience transformative learning. This metacognition was developed both as students adopted the role of a mentor, and as they responded to the challenges of their mentor in their role as a mentee. The peer mentor relationships that were most effective in fostering transformative learning involved students who were friends or who were at least compatible. In the light of the disorienting dilemma posed by major self-directed learning tasks, the introduction of a peer mentor program proved to be an integral dimension of transformative pedagogy, especially in terms of the emotional support that it afforded students.

### **9.3 The Importance of Affective and Cognitive Dimensions in the Process of Critical Reflection**

An essential facet of transformative learning is the importance of critical reflection. In his analysis of research on transformative learning, Edward Taylor (2000) points out that “several studies concluded that critical reflection is granted too much importance and does not give enough attention to the significance of affective learning – the role of emotions and feelings in the process of transformation” (p. 303). This study reveals that the neat dichotomy between critical reflection and affective learning is itself flawed because the very process of critical reflection involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. In Chapter 6, I highlighted the interfusion of affective and cognitive dimensions in the reflective writing of my students, touching on the neurological work of Damasio (2000) in this context. Edward Taylor (2000) draws attention to the fact that studies undertaken by “Morgan (1987), Coffman (1989), and Sveinunggaard (1993) found that critical reflection can only begin once emotions have been validated and worked through” (p. 303). My exploration of *The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning* in Chapter 8 provides confirmation for these findings. The cognitive dimensions of critical reflection were more active once the initial affective responses to the disorienting dilemma were validated and had begun to be explored through dialogue with others and through reflective writing. In their studies, Lytle (1989) and Scott (1991) demonstrated that an event that triggers transformative learning possesses both an external and internal

orientation (Edward Taylor, 2000, p. 299). In Chapter 8, it is clear that the external event that triggered disequilibrium in my students was my announcement that they were to complete a challenging self-directed Major Work. This produced internal disequilibrium in many of them, as they felt daunted by the task. In Chapter 6, this study revealed that critical reflection may be fostered through reflective writing that enables students to give voice to thoughts and feelings prompted by a disorienting dilemma.

Chapter 6 also highlighted the benefits of reflective writing in developing the metacognition that often precedes transformation of a frame of reference. In this chapter I explored the notion that writing is not merely a record of reflection, but that meaning emerges in the course of writing and is even produced through the act of writing itself. The value of writing in providing a means by which thoughts and feelings are externalised and then re-internalised was explored.

As a result of this study, the value of encouraging my students to write reflectively has emerged as an important dimension of transformative pedagogy. The study also highlights the benefits of dialogue journals as a means by which students' feelings might be validated and reflection might be further stimulated in students. At the same time, dialogue journals require students to be highly vulnerable and although I was struck by the candour of most of my students, some found that the reflective writing process felt "weird" or "contrived". This highlights the need for teachers using dialogue journals to respond empathically to students' reflective writing. It also emphasises the need for teachers to encourage students' fledgling attempts at reflective writing in the hope that as their familiarity with this type of writing grows, they will begin to experience the reassurance that may flow from this form of written dialogue.

Developing a reflective attitude to learning, especially through encouraging students to write reflectively, maximises the likelihood that they will recognise the need to transform limited frames of reference in favour of new ones. Transformative learning can never be reduced to a formulaic register of strategies, because at the heart of transformation lies the unique selfhood of each person. Nevertheless, my research affirms the importance of critical reflection, fostered



through reflective writing or dialogue with others, as a precursor to learning that is transformative. Transformative pedagogy creates a freedom in the learning environment so individuals are able to uniquely think, feel and be. It also encourages students to think actively about their own unique style of learning and the feelings associated with the learning process. Through fostering emancipatory learning environments and encouraging strategies such as keeping a reflective journal, conditions conducive to transformative learning may be fostered.

#### **9.4 The Role of Exposure to Challenging Literary Lifeworlds in the Transformative Learning Process**

In Chapter 7 this study illuminated the benefits for students of being exposed to challenging literary texts. This includes texts written in a variety of genres, for a variety of audiences and purposes, and a range of visual texts, including film. In their critical, imaginative and reflective writing, students demonstrated that exposure to literary lifeworlds meant that they were confronted with new ways of seeing the world. Students' writing about literature manifested hallmarks of potentially transformative thinking and feeling. These included the generation of metaphors, posing of questions, embracing of multiple perspectives, identification of parallels within a text and identification of transformed meaning perspectives in literary characters. Engaging with literary texts triggered critical reflection and self-reflection in students. Composing imaginative texts meant that they were drawing on their imaginations to form lifeworlds different from their own. This, too, challenged students to consider alternative perspectives.

In this context, transformative pedagogy involved, where possible, the selection of texts that would prove suitably challenging to students. It also involved giving students the freedom to respond to texts in their own ways and to discover meaningful personal resonances with the lifeworlds represented in these texts. I also found that setting tasks that gave students sufficient scope to explore their ideas and that allowed students to frame their own areas of exploration was important in the process of fostering transformative learning.

## **9.5 The Importance of Freedom and Self-Direction in the Transformative Learning Process**

This study has affirmed that whilst relational forms of knowing, fostered through dialogic learning contexts, are essential to transformative learning, the need for learners to be given the freedom to experience the emotional vicissitudes of a disorienting dilemma is also of paramount importance. In Chapter 8 I explored the idea that whilst transformative learning in a pedagogical context is ideally experienced in relation with others, it is also experienced by students being given the freedom to engage in self-directed learning. The autonomy of thought and feeling flowing from emancipatory learning environments is essential to transformative learning. Through engaging in challenging self-directed learning tasks, my students were catapulted into confronting a range of emotional responses that were, in particular, reflective of their views of themselves as learners. The tasks proved problematic for them because they disrupted their established frames of reference by demanding of them an approach to learning that did not fit with their previous perceptions of themselves as learners. Through experiencing emotional disequilibrium and, in turn, through questioning the validity of their emotional responses in the light of their learning experiences, some students revised previously established perceptions of themselves as learners. As students engaged in self-directed learning, an important dimension of transformative pedagogy was the provision of emotional and cognitive scaffolding. This scaffolding enabled them to move from experiencing an initial sense of disequilibrium to a point where they were able to question, and sometimes revise, previous meaning schemes and frames of reference.

Whilst challenging self-directed learning tasks triggered what I have termed healthy disequilibrium in most of my students, some students experienced what I have termed unhealthy disequilibrium. This unhealthy disequilibrium manifested itself in responses of denial, resistance and paralysis. Through my experience with my students I discovered that the challenges posed by a range of pedagogical approaches conducive to transformative learning are often threatening. This is clear in my exploration of the dialogic classroom in Chapter 4 and is also evident in my description and analysis of students' initial responses to being set a major

self-directed learning task in Chapter 8. Nevertheless, establishing challenging learning contexts means that students are faced with ideal catalysts to self-reflection that in turn may foster transformative learning. Striking a balance between challenging students and providing them with support is a key dimension of transformative pedagogy.

## 9.6 The Hallmarks of Transformative Learning

One of the interesting aspects of the phenomenon of transformative learning is that it is comprised of a combination of ostensibly contradictory elements. It is simultaneously relational and autonomous, reflective and active, affective and cognitive, liberating and painful, rewarding and confronting, a process and a product. The fusion of these elements testifies to the complexity of the phenomenon. Yet when explored in practice, the fusion of these elements presents itself not so much as problematic, but as a reflection of the fact that to experience transformative learning is to experience a mixture of dimensions central to being human. Making meaning of human experience involves reflexive movement between these frequently polarised states of being. When engaging in the process of transformative learning, my students revealed a capacity for critical reflection and self-reflection. This was most clearly evident in their dialogue with others and in their writing. Embedded in students' speech and writing, *signs* of thinking and feeling that were potentially transformative were obvious. But more than this, in the *process* of engaging in dialogue with others and of writing reflectively, critically and imaginatively, students formed and re-formed perceptions of themselves, others and their world. The most significant transformations of students' frames of reference were evident in their changed attitudes and approaches to learning. In particular, when students revised the way they viewed themselves as learners and began to acknowledge their capacity to direct their own learning, they demonstrated new confidence in the way they approached future challenging learning tasks.

My study has called into question the view that transformative learning is a uniquely adult phenomenon (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Mezirow, 2000). It has demonstrated that adolescent high school students between the ages of fifteen and

seventeen may experience transformative learning and that this may be fostered through transformative pedagogy. The relevance of the literature on transformative learning in adult learning contexts to the learning of my Years 10 and 11 students further highlights the fact that transformative learning should no longer be considered a uniquely adult phenomenon.

## **9.7 Transformative Learning and the Tyranny of Time**

There is no doubt that the pressure on teachers to get through vast quantities of content has increased in recent years. In analysing research on transformative learning, Edward Taylor (2000) notes that “studies suggest that to foster transformative learning much time, intensity of experience, risk, and personal exploration are required of both student and teacher” (p. 315). Nevertheless, this study shows both the value and efficacy of investing time in learning experiences that may be potentially transformative for students. As a result of reflection on my practice I have come to realise that the need to “get through content” is aided, not hindered, by transformative pedagogy. This is because students’ understanding of the content deepens as they engage in reflective practices associated with transformative learning. Having said this, giving students time to engage in dialogue with one another meant that I had to make this a priority by spending less time on other activities, such as giving lectures, that may be deemed by some as a more efficient way of “getting through the content”. Being prepared to take the risk that in engaging with one another and in their own reflection students will discover a variety of perspectives on a range of texts is an important dimension of transformative pedagogy in a high school English context. Nevertheless, there is still never enough time! Some students commented in their learning logs and in focus group interviews that they would have liked to have been given more class time to write reflectively and to spend with their peer mentors. Ideal conditions for learning were not always a reality but I came to realise that a dimension of transformative pedagogy involved maximising the opportunities for transformative learning within the given time constraints.

## 9.8 Personal Transformation

The process of engaging in this research has transformed me in significant ways. Adopting the roles of teacher and researcher simultaneously has been a powerful experience. Baumgart (1997-1998) draws attention to the fact that a relinquishment of divisions, such as those often erected between teacher and researcher, is a hallmark of postmodern thinking:

Consistent with the complexity of a globalised world and a rejection of hegemonic divisions which artificially partition people, events, or nations into categories which maintain entrenched power bases, postmodern thinking is more likely to describe diasporas derived from blurred boundaries, the crossing and re-crossing of borders, and the dissolving of divisions (p. 47).

The dissolving of the division between me as teacher and as researcher meant that through engaging in hermeneutic phenomenological research I became more focused on the minutiae of my students' experiences and my practice as a teacher. This deep reflection enriched the quality of both my research and my teaching practice. My personal satisfaction as a teacher also increased as I became more attuned to what was happening in my classrooms and to the ways in which I might modify or alter approaches to teaching and learning in an attempt to foster transformation in my students. I have become more conscious of pedagogical processes than I was before I embarked on my research and am now better able to anticipate and prepare for transformation in my students. Becoming more conscious of what is happening within my students, within me, and in the dynamics between them and me has also been confronting. Transformative pedagogy is based on a commitment to relational ways of knowing that demand risk-taking and vulnerability. This form of pedagogy is time-consuming and can be intense and emotionally draining. It is also rewarding and invigorating. It brings to the surface and lays bare the shortcomings, as well as the strengths, of the teacher.

As a teacher engaged in research, I noticed that my relationships with my students grew more empathic. Undertaking this major self-directed research project has given me a new appreciation of the difficulties, frustration and excitement

experienced by my students as they engage in major self-directed learning projects. Empathy between my students and me was not, however, unidirectional. As I was open with my students about the broad brushstrokes of my research, I noticed that they were keen to support me, to inquire about my research and to write openly and honestly in their learning logs. This, in turn, enabled me to more empathically respond to their needs as I reflected on their thoughts and feelings in planning future learning experiences. On one occasion, just prior to the end of a term, I mentioned in passing to one of my classes that I was giving a paper at a conference of postgraduate students over the holiday period. I remember my surprise when, at the beginning of the following term, one of my students, Anthony, spontaneously asked me how the conference went. I responded briefly, and then he probed further through a series of questions: Did your paper go well? What did you learn about transformative learning? Was the conference helpful for your thesis? He demonstrated a genuine interest in *my* learning, in ways that made me aware that teacher-student empathy can be a reciprocal relationship. Over the course of my research, I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of my students on a number of occasions.

As a result of my experiences, I have come to believe that in its most productive form empathy is a dynamic between teacher-researcher and students that energises both teaching and learning in ways that are conducive to transformation for all involved. Indeed, the mutuality of the transformative learning experiences of students and teachers should not be overlooked. Based on my experience, I am convinced that commitment to reflective practice has the potential to foster transformative learning in teachers and ultimately in their students. Providing a transparent model of reflective practice (through dialogue journals and through sharing reflections about the teaching and learning process with students in the classroom) is an important dimension of transformative pedagogy because it encourages students themselves to engage in self-reflection.

## **9.9 Limitations of the Study and Other Reflections**

Engaging in an extended period of teacher-research has been the most beneficial and rewarding form of professional development that I have undertaken in the

course of my career. Nevertheless, the experience of being both teacher and researcher simultaneously brought with it difficulties as well as benefits. Juggling the demands of working full time and of studying part time proved to be taxing. On top of a full teaching load that predominantly involved teaching senior classes, and the marking and preparation associated with teaching those classes, I was committed to other extra-curricular and pastoral responsibilities within the school. In collaboration with three other colleagues, I was also involved in offering professional development training courses to colleagues. Had I been working part time and studying full time, the nature of this research would have been different. I would have had more time for reflection and, possibly, for conducting more focus group interviews, or for collecting other forms of data. As it was, I resolved to use data that flowed naturally from the normal learning experiences in which my students engaged. Ethically, the idea of requesting students to engage in extra activities that were not central to their learning, in order that I might gather information for my study, did not rest easily with me. I wanted to engage in a model of research that placed my students' needs and development at the fore. Looking back on my experiences I do, however, wish that I had asked colleagues to observe my classes, as I am sure that the feedback that other people could have provided would have been useful to my exploration of the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. Comments on the visual cues occurring within my classes, from the perspective of a neutral observer, would have been illuminating. Not having anyone to monitor the dynamic between my students and me meant that the study was centred on my perceptions and my students' perceptions of this dynamic. The inter-subjective and intra-subjective nature of the research provided great scope for the study and yielded many interesting findings, but other facets may have been illuminated if I had had others observing my classes.

As I look back on my students' written and verbal reflections, I am aware that this study yielded interesting insights due to the quality of their responses. The students that formed the basis of this study were, for the most part, intelligent and articulate. Students who find it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings may be just as disposed to transformative learning as the students who formed the basis of this study, but it may not be as easy to illicit responses from them in a study

like this one. I was fortunate that the students who formed the basis of this study were both willing and able to share their thoughts and feelings about their learning. As a result, I was able to collect a rich array of “data” to analyse, explore and write about. In this sense, students’ articulations provided evidence of transformative learning and testified to key dimensions of transformative pedagogy. Their comments provided valuable insights for me as I sought to give shape to this study.

The feasibility of this study must also be attributed to the support I received from the headmaster of the school and my head of department. From the outset, the headmaster was actively supportive of members of staff undertaking research. Without his permission I could not have undertaken the research. Had I been working under a less supportive head, the study may have proved too difficult. The fact that my head of department gave all in the department free reign to experiment with approaches to teaching and learning meant that I had the flexibility to engage in this type of study. A head of department who had been more autocratic, or who had rigid expectations of the way literature should be taught, could have stifled my attempts to engage in transformative pedagogy.

Another issue that has interested me in the final stages of this research is the extent to which the transformative learning experiences of my students may continue to impact upon them in their future lives. In exploring *The Spiral of Transformative Self-Directed Learning*, I discovered that in spiralling towards peak experiences, my students experienced periods of self-doubt and that they sometimes endured plateaus along the way. Nevertheless, ultimately they reached key moments of experience characterised by their awareness that they were no longer the same as when they had embarked upon the self-directed learning project. They had clearly *embodied* the experience of transformation. Their transformed perceptions of themselves as learners impacted on future learning experiences but I am not able to comment on the extent to which their experiences may yield ongoing results. I do know that where students were able to consolidate their transformative learning experiences, through being provided with enabling conditions over a longer stretch of time, the benefits were evident. Perhaps this is



because through consolidation, students were able to more deeply embody feelings of self-confidence and other transformed perceptions of themselves.

## **9.10 Implications of the Research**

### **9.10.1 Fostering Transformative Models of Staff Professional Development**

Having experienced the benefits of reflecting on my practice as a teacher, I have developed a commitment to ongoing reflection on the learning experiences of my students and on the ways in which I may better foster transformative learning. The experience of teacher-research has also caused me to reflect upon models of staff professional development within schools. Smith (1999), in referring to his own teaching milieu, reflects on the importance of making space for reflection within the cacophonous frenzy that often characterises school life:

The ability to attend to ourselves, to our students, to our collective lives depends first and foremost on a form of stopping, and the creation of a space in which we can truly listen and hear ourselves. In our own teacher education program at the University of Lethbridge – and it has a reputation for being a good one – the most appalling aspect to me is that it is so full, so busy, so noisy. This is usually taken as a sign that “real” things are happening, that there is no “wasted” time, that “standards of performance are maintained at a consistently high level”. Again, this reflects the modernist three-fold impulse to name, anchor and accrete, so that fullness is understood only one way – as an absence of space. And it is precisely that mentality which gets transposed and reproduced in schools, just as it underwrites the rhetoric about success in the worlds of business and politics.

The problem is that such an approach is simply unsustainable (p. 98).

In my experience, this absence of space for reflection to which Smith alludes is a grim reality for teachers. This is partly due to the frenzy of school life but it is also a product of the top-down approach to staff professional development adopted in many schools. All too often, staff professional development in schools emphasises the importance of “experts” from outside (who may once have been teachers) sharing their expertise with teachers who are engaged in real teaching and learning experiences day by day. But as Deal (1986) points out: “Excellence

or improvement cannot be installed or mandated from outside; it must be developed from within. It must arise from collective conversations, behaviors, and spirit among teachers, administrators, students, and parents within a local school community” (pp. 126-127).

In the same way that self-directed learning may lead to transformation in students, my experience of engaging in phenomenological research has opened my eyes to the transformative potential for teachers of self-directed reflection on their practice. Cranton (1996) has explored the idea that certain forms of professional development function as transformative learning for educators. Cranton and King (2003) put it this way:

Effective professional development brings our habits of mind about teaching into consciousness and allows us to examine critically what we believe and value in our work as educators. The goal is to open up alternatives, introduce new ways of thinking about teaching – a goal that is potentially transformative (p. 34).

Enrolling in research degrees or other postgraduate courses that focus on reflective practice is one way for teachers to foster this reflection on practice but this will not be a desirable option for all teachers. Nevertheless, even without engaging in formalised postgraduate courses, it is still possible for teachers to develop reflective practices within the contexts in which they find themselves. One way in which teachers might do this is through devising their own informal action research projects based on areas of personal interest. As Elliott (1991) states:

Action research improves practice by developing the practitioner’s capacity for discrimination and judgement in particular, complex, human situations. It unifies inquiry, the improvement of performance and the development of persons in their professional role (p. 52).

Engagement in this type of research guarantees that professional development is relevant to teachers, for as Elliott (1991) highlights, “Within this form of educational inquiry, theoretical abstraction plays a subordinate role in the development of a practical wisdom grounded in reflective experiences of concrete

cases” (p. 53). Fullan (1993) expresses the importance of personal vision and inquiry for teachers, arguing that these flow from “the ability to simultaneously *express and extend* what you value. The genesis of change arises from this dynamic tension” (p. 14). My research has led me to conclude that models of professional development that foster critical reflection in teachers need to take priority over one-off in-service lectures by external educational consultants. A lot of money is often spent on the latter and whilst listening to such speakers can be inspirational, their insights cannot replace the benefits gained from teachers reflecting on their own practice. Speaking about adult education contexts, Cranton and King (2003) state: “When professional developers engage educators of adults in dialogue about their thoughts and questions, such critically reflective practice can lead the educators to challenging exchanges and the construction of new understanding” (p. 36). I would argue that the same transformative possibilities may emerge for educators in a high school context.

Discovering the benefits of close reflection on my own practice, for my own professional development and for my students, was one of the major personal outcomes of my research. Yet if reflective practice is to become a key dimension of staff professional development in schools, the need for teachers to dialogue with one another about their personal teaching experiences and to engage in collaborative inquiry should also be recognised. Storr (1988) states, “Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one’s own inner world are all facilitated by solitude” (p. 28). This is true but solitude alone, without times of collaboration with like-minded colleagues, can be soul-destroying. One of the most difficult dimensions of engaging in this research was the need to reconcile myself to hours on end of aloneness. This solitude did yield fruitful reflection but I could never have sustained it without it being balanced by times of stimulating discussion with others. Whilst I am thankful to many of my colleagues for the interest they showed in my research, in the course of our busy working days it was often not possible to engage in meaningful discussion with them about it. As a result, the meetings with my supervisor were particularly significant because with her I could engage in the kind of reflective discourse that my research has shown was of great benefit to my students. It was in these meetings that my unfolding perceptions about the nature of transformative learning and

transformative pedagogy began to take shape. Recognising the benefits of collaborative inquiry and the need for postgraduate researchers to gain support from one another, my supervisor also organised gatherings of the postgraduate students that she was supervising. Although we were working on different areas of inquiry, there was inevitably overlap and I welcomed these opportunities to engage in dialogue with like-minded others. In addition to this, I met on a regular basis with one of my colleagues who was undertaking a doctorate at the same time as me. We discussed our progress and offered support and encouragement to one another.

Fullan (1999) argues that “the biggest problem facing schools is fragmentation and overload” (p. 39). In this climate, my research has caused me to think afresh about the need for collaborative schools and professional learning communities (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Louis and Kruse, 1995). In collaborative schools, as Fullan (1999) explains,

teachers as a group and as subgroups examine together how well students are doing (i.e. they study student work and assessment data), they relate this to how they are teaching (i.e. to instructional practice), and they make continuous refinements individually and with each other (i.e. as a professional community). By contrast, in individualistic or balkanized cultures, teachers either leave each other alone or are at loggerheads – disagreeing without any inclination or process to solve differences (pp. 32-33).

Since I began my research, the school in which I work has faced unprecedented changes. These include the introduction of new syllabus documents that require implementation, changes in child protection legislation and issues surrounding duty of care, and increasing demands to introduce new technologies in the classroom. Within this culture there have been some collaborative efforts to meet these demands but organised staff professional development has not always reflected the need for teachers to spend time in dialogue with one another about these changes. Fullan (1999) argues that “the true value of collaborative cultures is that they simultaneously encourage passion and provide emotional support as people work through the rollercoaster of change. In this sense these organizations foment moral purpose while providing support for its pursuit” (p. 38). The

intellectual and emotional demands of teaching, and especially of transformative pedagogy, mean that now, more than ever before, staff professional development would benefit from an emphasis on collaborative inquiry. One significant implication of my research is that transformative learning experienced by individual students may be fostered by transformative pedagogy. Another implication is that in order for teachers to be willing and able to embrace transformative pedagogy, models of staff professional development need to be reformed to foster the dialogue necessary to trigger transformative reflection in teachers. As Fullan (1993) explains, “change in teaching for more effective learning requires major transformation in the culture of the school, and vice versa” (p. 55).

Beatty’s (1999) study of the benefits to eight secondary school teachers meeting together “once a month over a five month period for focused reflection, professional study and collaboration” (p. 2) found, amongst other things, that “participants reported in interview feeling more confident about their ability to be effective in the classroom, and to reflect on that effectiveness.... They felt freer to experiment, to take risks and to be creative” (p. 18). Leithwood (1992) points to key hallmarks of transformational leadership as being reflection and collaboration. Through engaging in this research I have come to the conclusion that transformative pedagogy is best fostered through the development of professional learning communities, inspired by transformational leadership, in which reflection and collaboration are seen as primary focuses of staff professional growth.

### **9.10.2 The Need for Agency and Communion in Learning Contexts**

In effect, the balance between personal and collaborative inquiry that I have been discussing in the context of staff professional development is a reflection of the balance that I have discovered students need to experience when engaging in learning that may be transformative for them. Marshall (2001) speaks of the need for both “agency and communion” which

are potentially complementary coping strategies for dealing with the uncertainties and anxieties of being alive. Agency is an expression of independence through self-protection, self-assertion

and control of the environment. Communion is the sense of being 'at one' with other organisms or the context, its basis is integration, interdependence, receptivity (p. 435).

Marshall (2001) describes her combination of agency and communion in more detail:

I will push, pursue, shape, persist in a path of inquiry. And I will treat what happens and how I find myself acting and speaking as potentially meaningful, as having the possibility of 'in-forming' me, that is of giving shape to my way of seeing, not simply imparting information in frameworks already established. These complementary tendencies are always in dialogue, sometimes in tension, sometimes combining with fluidity. At my best, then, I am both directed and open/receptive, testing this dynamic combination in the moment (p. 435).

These "complementary tendencies" fit well with what this and other studies have revealed about the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. The students who formed the basis of this study moved between agency (in their self-directed learning, in their reflective writing and in their articulation of ideas in the classroom) and communion (in their peer mentor relationships, in their reflective discourse with me, and in their receptivity to ideas raised in the dialogic classroom). Educators interested in fostering transformative learning in their students may wish to consider ways in which both agency and communion may be fostered. Furthermore, those wishing to foster transformative learning in teachers may also wish to consider ways in which this combination may be fostered. As Smits (1997) argues,

the possibilities for reflection and transformation of our practices is [sic] made possible by a belonging – by the fact that we are immersed in language with others. Thus critical reflection is not something that happens as a consequence of the individual setting himself or herself apart from the situation to be understood – reflection and understanding are imminent in the very "webs of interlocution" that we find ourselves in (p. 288).

My research findings and the process of engaging in the research process have led me to conclude that learning contexts based on agency and communion are ideally suited to fostering transformative learning in students and teachers alike. Indeed I would argue that an educator's openness to the possibility of personal

transformation is an important dimension of transformative pedagogy. Greene (1978), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, links the capacity for educators to foster transformation in others with their capacity to know themselves and the lived worlds in which they find themselves:

Merleau-Ponty says that what defines the human being “is not the capacity to create a second nature – economic, social, or cultural – beyond biographical nature; it is rather the capacity to go beyond created structures in order to create others.” To me, this has enormous relevance for teaching – the kind of teaching that moves persons to reflection and to going beyond. Only, however, if educators can remain in touch with their own histories, their own background consciousnesses, can they engage with others who are making their own efforts to transcend (p. 103).

## **9.11 Suggestions for Further Research**

This research could be used as a springboard for further research in the field of transformative learning, particularly in a high school context. I would be interested to discover what teaching and learning strategies other teacher-researchers may find are effective in fostering transformative learning in both the subject of English and in other subject areas. Any one of the dimensions explored in Chapters 4 to 8 of this study could be studied in more detail in order to uncover how transformative learning may be fostered through transformative pedagogy. My study focused on students in a top Year 10 class and a top Year 11 class. It would also be interesting to discover whether transformative learning might be fostered in students in the early years of high school. The extent to which the approaches I adopted would be effective in fostering transformative learning in less able and less motivated students would also form an interesting study. When conducting research with less able and less articulate students, other research methods may yield more illuminating data. For example, in addition to the analysis of learning logs, teacher-researchers may choose to have colleagues observe and comment upon their lessons. Videotaping lessons may also provide useful insights into classroom dynamics that may not be captured in students’ descriptions.

This study has explored the role that the study of literary texts may play in fostering transformative learning. The impact of being exposed to alternative viewpoints through the study of literary texts and the process of creating imaginary lifeworlds through composing imaginative texts was explored. It would be interesting for future studies to explore the role of other art forms, such as music, dance, drama, painting and sculpture in fostering transformative learning. How might study of the arts and active participation in the arts, in both high school and adult learning contexts, foster transformative learning?

If I had had more time and space, I also would have liked to explore in more detail the types of school structures and cultures that are most effective in fostering the transformative learning of students and educators. A related area for further study is the extent to which the pedagogical and management philosophies of school principals and the professional development approaches in schools may foster or inhibit transformative learning.

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that educators who themselves hold a transformative conception of learning may implicitly or explicitly engender such a conception of learning in their students. The students I taught who form the basis of this study were aware of my research and of my transformative conception of learning. This in itself may well have made them more disposed to such an experience of learning than they would otherwise have been. Biggs (1985) has pointed out “that students ‘read’ the learning environment, particularly the assessment requirements, and subsequently choose a strategy that parallels the learning motive for that particular context” (Brownlee, Purdie and Boulton-Lewis, 2003, p. 111). I would add, however, that it is difficult to feign transformation, and especially difficult to sustain the lasting effects of learning that is truly transformative. To foster deep approaches to learning that are potentially transformative is not to be coercive or manipulative, but to invite serious reflection in one’s students about the purpose and nature of learning itself. Nevertheless, an exploration of the connections between the learning experiences, past and present, of educators who possess a transformative conception of pedagogy and the learning experiences of their students would make a fascinating study.



Cranton (2002) strikes the balance between the responsibilities of the teacher and of learners in the transformative learning process when she states: “We cannot teach transformation. We often cannot even identify how or why it happens. But we can teach as though the possibility always exists that a student will have a transformative experience” (p. 71). In a study of adult educators’ responses to the question, What do you want your adult learners to walk away with at the end of your time together, developmentally speaking?, Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler (2000) found, in broad terms, that what was wanted was for the learner to be a growing self who can challenge assumptions and, through self-reflection, change these where necessary to arrive at considered action. In answer to how as educators they might achieve these goals, these educators highlighted the fact that they focused on these intentions and “designed their courses with the potential for transformation in mind” (Kathleen Taylor, 2000, p. 163). In my context, too, transformative pedagogy has meant bearing “the potential for transformation in mind”. This kind of pedagogy is essentially a pedagogy of optimism and hope because at its core lies the belief that learners can change in ways that will make them more self-aware, more in control of their behaviour, and more authentic. Nevertheless, in spite of my attempts to generate experiences and learning contexts that might foster transformative learning, this study testifies to the fact that some students responded more than others to these experiences and contexts. As Imel (1998) states:

Although it is difficult for transformative learning to occur without the teacher playing a key role, participants also have a responsibility for creating the learning environment. As part of a community of knowers, learners share the responsibility for constructing and creating the conditions under which transformative learning can occur (p. 4).

This study has revealed that some of my students were more receptive to transformative learning than others and for a few students it was a form of learning that was too confronting or challenging for them. It would be interesting for future studies to explore case studies of students taught by teachers with a transformative conception of pedagogy. These studies could address the question, What is it that makes some students of educators with a transformative conception

of pedagogy experience transformative learning, whilst others do not? Clark and Wilson (1991) highlight the importance of personal and sociocultural contextual factors in influencing the process of transformative learning. Taylor (1998) states that

the influence of personal contextual factors on a perspective transformation is found in what is referred to by other studies as a readiness for change (Bailey 1996; Hunter 1980; Pierce 1986; Van Nostrand 1992), the role of experience (Coffman 1989), prior stressful life events (Vogelsang 1993), and a predisposition for a transformative experience (Turner 1986). Taylor (1994), in his study on the transformative nature of intercultural competency, found that the participants “were ready for change due to former critical events, personal goals, or prior intercultural experiences” (p. 169) (p. 27).

This study has not focused on contextual factors beyond the classroom, and whilst these studies mentioned by Taylor (1998) have done so, it would be interesting to undertake a study of personal contextual factors influencing transformative learning in high school students.

It would also be exciting to see collaborative inquiry amongst like-minded colleagues into the nature of transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. This research could incorporate an exploration of the ways in which reflective practitioners may inspire reflection in their students and the extent to which this might foster mutually transformative learning. In an adult context, Cranton (1994) has highlighted the importance of educators being open to the possibility of personally transformative learning:

The educator who is not a learner becomes an assembly-line worker implementing well-worn habitual tricks and techniques.... The educator who is not a learner cannot act as a model of learning. The educator who is not a critically self-reflective learner will not be likely to stimulate critical reflection among learners (p. 228).

This is just as true in a high school context as it is in an adult learning context. If the transformative dimensions of the learning process are modelled authentically by the teacher, then I would argue that it is possible for a dynamic to develop that may foster transformation in students and teacher alike. Clark (1993) suggests

“that transformational learning has changed the landscape of adult learning and that it is having a discernable impact on practice” (p. 55). It is my hope that, in the coming years, an increasing awareness of transformative learning, and of the pedagogy that fosters it, might emerge in high schools, and that the impact on practice in these learning contexts might be equally significant.

## **9.12 The Essence of Transformative Learning and Transformative Pedagogy**

When I embarked on this research, I hoped that my explorations would enable me to discover the types of teaching and learning strategies that may lead to students experiencing significant personal transformation. I wanted to know how I might better program for, and facilitate, learning that would profoundly change students’ limited and sometimes distorted perceptions of themselves, others and the world. Over the course of my research, what I came to realise is that transformative learning, and the pedagogy that fosters it, cannot be reduced to a catalogue of strategies, or a prescriptive “how to” manual. Instead, it involves recognising that learning that is transformative cuts to the heart of what it means to be human. In essence, the teaching and learning strategies that have been highlighted in this thesis are often effective in fostering transformative learning because they encourage individual learners to tune in to their own thoughts and feelings by reflecting on their assumptions about how they see themselves, others and the world. The chapters of this thesis also highlight that to be truly human means to engage in relationships with other individuals. As a result of empathic interaction with others, an individual’s capacity to become aware of his or her assumptions, and subsequently to experience transformation, is enhanced. This realisation of the essential nature of transformative learning, and of the pedagogy that fosters it, has transformed my personal conception of what it means to be a teacher. To teach is not so much *to do*, as *to be*, and to encourage others *to be* courageous, authentic individuals, capable of meaningful self-reflection and lifelong transformative learning.

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# **Appendix A**

## **Subject Information Statement and Consent Form for Parents and Students, 2000**

### **SUBJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT**

Researcher: Susan Marks

Ph: 9847 8249 (w)

Supervisor: Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold

Ph: 9351 2222 (w)

November, 2000.

Dear Parents

I am currently undertaking research toward a PhD in Education through the University of Sydney. The current title of my research project is:

An exploration of factors contributing to transformative learning in a high school English context.

In my thesis, I would like to write about what I have learnt from working with my 10AA English class this year. This will involve analysing the factors that contribute to students experiencing significant personal change. In order to illustrate my ideas, I would like to incorporate quotations from some of the students' Major Works and leaning logs. Should I include material from your son's or daughter's writing, their anonymity would be guaranteed, as a pseudonym would be used when quoting from their work.

In order to use material from your child's writing, I need to gain written permission from both them and you. I would very much appreciate it if you and your child would complete the enclosed consent forms and return them to me as soon as possible. Should you or your child decide not to give permission, for any reason at all, I fully respect your decision. Would you please also witness your child's signature as they fill in their consent form.

Yours sincerely

Susan Marks.

## CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS

I am happy for Susan Marks to use extracts from my child's 10AA Major Work and from his/her learning log in her PhD thesis, provided all such material remains confidential and my child remains anonymous. I have read and understood the Subject Information Statement and the Consent Form and have understood the purpose of the study.

.....(child's name)

.....(signature of parent)

.....(please print name)

.....(date)

## CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

I am happy for Susan Marks to use extracts from my 10AA major Work and from my learning log in her PhD thesis, provided all such material remains confidential and I remain anonymous. I have read and understood the Subject Information Statement and the Consent Form and have understood the purpose of the study.

.....(student's signature)

.....(witnessed by parent)

.....(date)

**Appendix B**  
**Subject Information Statement and Consent Form for**  
**Parents, 2001**

**SUBJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT FOR PARENTS**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE  
LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN A HIGH  
SCHOOL ENGLISH CONTEXT**

**RESEARCHER: Susan Marks**  
**SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold**  
**Faculty of Education, University of Sydney.**  
**Ph: 9351 2022**  
**[r.arnold@edfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:r.arnold@edfac.usyd.edu.au)**

12 November, 2001.

Dear Parents,

I am currently undertaking research toward a PhD in Education through the University of Sydney. My thesis will explore what I have learnt from working with my current Year 11 English class. This will involve reflecting on my own teaching practice to explore strategies that may have influenced students experiencing significant change as learners. My reflections will be based on observations of students and of their work within the context of their normal English classes. In order to illustrate my ideas, I would like to incorporate quotations from:

- a) some of your son's/daughter's regular writing produced in their Year 11 Advanced English course.
- b) interviews of students conducted in small focus groups. (Interviewing of volunteer students in small focus groups will take about 40 minutes and will be audiotaped).

Should I include material from your son's or daughter's writing or speech, their anonymity would be guaranteed, as a pseudonym would be used when quoting them.

In order to use material from your child's writing and/or speech, I need to gain written permission from both them and you. I would very much appreciate it if you and your child would complete the enclosed Consent Forms, and return them to me as soon as possible. Should you or your child decide not to give permission, for any reason at all, I fully respect your decision. Would you mind also witnessing your child's signature as they fill in their consent form?

Yours sincerely

Susan Marks

(Any person with complaints or concerns about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager of Ethics and Biosafety, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811).

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**SUBJECT CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE  
LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN A HIGH  
SCHOOL ENGLISH CONTEXT**

**RESEARCHER: Susan Marks**

a) I am happy for Susan Marks to use extracts from my child’s writing in her PhD thesis, provided all such material remains confidential and my child remains anonymous.

.....(signature of parent).  
.....(please print name).  
.....(child’s name).  
.....(date).

b) I am happy for my child to volunteer to be interviewed by participating in a small focus group, provided their comments remain confidential and my child remains anonymous.

.....(signature of parent).  
.....(please print name).  
.....(child’s name).  
.....(date).

I have read and understood the Subject Information Statement and the Consent Form and have understood the purpose of the study. I understand that granting permission is voluntary and that I may change my mind at any time without prejudice.

.....(signature of parent).

(Any person with complaints or concerns about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager of Ethics and Biosafety Administration, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811. Alternatively, you may contact Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold on (02) 9351 2022).

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# **Appendix C**

## **Subject Information Statement and Consent Form for Students, 2001**

### **SUBJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT FOR STUDENTS**

#### **AN EXPLORATION OF THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CONTEXT**

**RESEARCHER:** Susan Marks  
**SUPERVISOR:** Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold  
Faculty of Education, University of Sydney.  
**Ph:** 9351 2022  
**Email:** [r.arnold@rdfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:r.arnold@rdfac.usyd.edu.au)

12 November 2001

Dear Student,

I am currently undertaking research towards a PhD in Education through the University of Sydney. My thesis will explore what I have learnt from working with you in English this year. This will involve reflecting on my own teaching practice to explore strategies that may have helped you experience significant change as a learner. My reflections will be based on observations of you and your work within the context of your normal English classes. In order to illustrate my ideas, I would like to incorporate quotations from:

- a) some of your regular writing produced in your Year 11 Advanced English course
- b) interviews of you conducted in small focus groups. (Interviewing of volunteers in small groups will take about 40 minutes and will be audiotaped).

Should I include material from your writing or speech, your anonymity would be guaranteed, as a pseudonym would be used.

In order to use material from your writing and speech in my thesis, I need to gain written permission from both you and your parents. I would very much appreciate it if you would complete the enclosed Consent Form and return it to me as soon as possible. Should you decide not to give permission, for any reason at all, I fully respect your decision.

Yours sincerely

Susan Marks.

(Any person with complaints or concerns about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager of Ethics and Biosafety, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811).

**SUBJECT CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE  
LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN A HIGH  
SCHOOL ENGLISH CONTEXT**

**RESEARCHER: Susan Marks**

a) I am happy for Ms Susan Marks to use extracts from my writing in her PhD thesis, providing all such material remains confidential and I remain anonymous.

.....(signature of student).  
.....(please print name).  
..... (parent’s signature).

b)I am happy to volunteer to be interviewed by participating in a small focus group, provided my comments remain confidential and I remain anonymous.

..... (signature of student).  
..... (please print name).  
..... (parent’s signature).

I have read and understood the Subject Information Statement and the Consent Form and have understood the purpose of the study. I understand that granting permission is voluntary and that I may change my mind at any time without prejudice.

.....(signature of student).  
.....(signature of parent).

(Any person with complaints or concerns about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager of Ethics and Biosafety Administration, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811. Alternatively, you may contact Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold on (02) 9351 2022).